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WHY DID HE DO IT?

BERNARD CAPES

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WHY DID HE DO IT?

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WHY DID HE DO IT?

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WHY DID HE DO IT?

PART I

CHAPTER I

MR. CASPAR URCHIN, F.R.S., M.N.S., M.S.S., Professor of Archæology and Director of the Department of Antiquities in the United Service Stores, came down to breakfast one foggy December morning just as any lesser man might have done. Though "trailing clouds of glory" in his wake, he was no more concerned about them at the moment than he was about the tassels of his dressing-gown, which bumped after him from stair to stair as he descended. From the practical point of view they were all just tags, and valueless.

The Professor had had, indeed, full time and opportunity, during the course of a chequered career, to reflect upon the social anomaly which could hedge a man with distinctions and leave him hungry. He had not at the outset foreseen this end to ambitions which had by no means limited themselves to the merely moral perquisites of his calling. He had taken, in imagination, his wisdom to a very profitable market; and, for result, here he was, at sixty-three, the undistinguished and underpaid servant of a co-operative company.

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Every one knew what that meant. His employers might, and did, exploit his qualifications to the best of their Company's credit; in the eyes of all the rest of the world that mattered he was a man of parts degraded. That, perhaps, would have affected him indifferently had the rewards been compensatory; but they were not. His directors were shrewd men of business, and could gauge to the odd penny the value of any services to themselves, however franked by capital letters.

No doubt, in all mundane matters, Professor Urchin had himself chiefly to thank for himself. He was not a consistent man or a single-hearted. His nature had always halted between the greeds for knowledge and for gold. When, having demonstrated, through algebraic symbols, the existence of an unrecorded gas, which was mathematically producible under conditions which never existed, but which, if they did exist, would show up certain things in a certain way, he had been awarded that high distinction which stood first to his name, his instant thought had been as to how he could best turn his honour to his material profit. So in his every acquirement of a new knowledge, in his every research and investigation, that question of the hidden mine of wealth was what fascinated him, in equal degree, at least, with the pursuit itself. He could always condescend to a hope of unearthing priceless coins from antique bureaux, of discovering invaluable illuminations concealed under the parchment covers of early printed-book bindings, of stripping superimpositions of paint from the pictured faces of mediæval Madonnas. He hardly halted even at a sneaking belief in alchemy, the universal menstruum, and the elixir of life.

So constituted, it is easy to understand that the

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Professor's character was a jumble of contradictions. He could, for instance, be fond in some directions, inhuman in others. His erudition did not prevent his taking a mischievous delight in gossip of the most frivolous description. Mentally "all there," he was subject, nevertheless, to fits of absent-mindedness, during which one might "pull his leg" without his knowing anything about it. A very bookworm by nature, he could become a malt-worm on provocation, and, throwing off the sage, like Dr. Johnson, for an evening's frolic with the boys, come home to excogitate logograms into the small hours of the morning. According to his mood, in short, he was a Fellow or a fellow; and, if the compositor has attended to his business, there is the distinction made without need of further words. Finally, with a most unprepossessing appearance of his own, he had somehow endowed his only child, Miss Pauline Urchin, with the best of the graces which he lacked.

As he stands in the breakfast-room, glowering fixedly before him through peculiarly glassy spectacles, we can draw his portrait without prejudice or enthusiasm. He is very thin and yellow and stale, with a hanging under-lip, and a nose like an aggravated chilblain. He wears no hair upon his face, strictly speaking; but a thin grizzle of it embraces his neck below razor mark, and makes his collar dirty. His shirt-cuffs are grimy and dogs'-eared, and he looks, generally, as if he has slept in his clothes. Washing, it is a principle with him, makes no reputations except with laundresses, and then it is commonly bad ones. In all matters pertaining to his worldly-wisdom the Professor, indeed, is "up to snuff," and takes no pains to hide his snuffiness under a bushel.

Now let us turn to consider the rose sprung from

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this brier. Miss Pauline is rather plump, rather gay-coloured, rather self-confident, with an impertinent nose, and extremely grey, "well-wooded" eyes. Her saucy mouth might be less voluble for perfection, but she is capable, like Macaulay, of "brilliant flashes of silence," which in the eyes, or ears, of her admirers not only redeem but almost sanctify her. When beauty foregoes a fault for a little, her abstinence impresses above the perpetual fasting of less gifted souls. It is with a shock of exceptional pity that we observe, as Pauline turns from her task of brewing the morning coffee to greet her widowed father, that she limps a little. She has done so for years. Her right foot, for some unaccountable reason, was paralysed when she was a child.

Pauline and her father, the man of stunted fortunes, lived appropriately in St. Peter's Square, Ladbroke Grove Road, that immense and dreary colony of the ineffectives. Their front windows looked out on a huge, barrack-like quadrangle, a four-square perspective of monotonous brick, with a denominational college set in it about the position of the tabernacle in the court of that name. The Square is of the suburbs, but unsuburban. It is not above a desire to call itself of Kensington—a sort of poor relation to the fashionable squares proper to that ilk. A good many "professionals" live there—people of the music-halls and theatres—with a sprinkling of the higher-employed womankind—type-writers, journalists, and so forth. Some of the houses, like Professor Urchin's, are whole houses; a number of others are "converted flats," which is a landlord's term for trisecting one abode with match-boarding, and thereby getting three times its natural rent out of it, or nearly. But the flats, though converted, are not at all good. There are the

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usual human passions distributed about the Square, but its area is so immense that they make no show. The only time on record when they came prominently into evidence was that winter when the water froze in all the houses, and the servant girls, many and diverse, came thronging about the stand-pipes in the streets. Nevertheless, Pauline managed to get much entertainment out of her surroundings.

"No, no," said the Professor, sitting down to his bacon on this particular morning, and his face creasing mischievously; "don't tell me, Pussy; I won't believe it."

"Won't believe what?" said the saucy girl—"that the Pettigrews' butler is their uncle John? I know it, I tell you."

"O, come now!"

"It's perfectly true. He's got exactly the face of the photograph, though they've taken that away. He used to drink, you know."

"Not much good for a butler."

"O! all their wine's temperance, though they stick real labels on the bottles. It's their way of doing good by stealth."

"Te-he! how they'd blush to find it fame. Who was there?"

"Clara Lovejoy, for one. She goes to confession to Mr. Drinkwater, ever since he came to St. Peter's. They say that's why he goes about with that shocked expression. It proves that she *can* tell the truth sometimes, anyhow. How did you enjoy your smoking-concert?"

"Very well, very well."

"I should love to go to one. Were the students noisy?"

"A little."

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"And young Mr. Mandrake?"

"He was my host, you see. I mustn't speak against him. By the way——"

"Yes?"

"I hope the young man won't be so foolish as to come."

"Come where?"

"Why, to the Stores. The fact is that, on our way home from St. Christopher's Hospital last night, we had a little discussion which ended in a little bet. I daresay we were both a trifle elated; but very likely he'll have forgotten all about it."

Pauline had a brief musing fit.

"Poor Mr. Mandrake!" she said presently. "I shouldn't have thought he could have afforded it."

"Afforded what?"

"Why, betting. His aunt keeps him, you know."

"No, I don't know," said the Professor sharply.

"But I'm telling you, dear," answered the girl serenely. "She lives in the country, and makes him an allowance—just enough, and no more. He's thought a very promising student."

"What ears you've got!" growled the Professor peevishly. "We haven't known the young gentleman for more than a week."

"No? Hardly long enough, one would think, for giving and accepting invitations to smoking-concerts."

"That's nothing to the point, miss—the natural condescension of an old whipper-snapper to a young. What are you laughing at? The boy appealed to me as seeming a young fellow of parts. In fact, if you wish to know, he's more than a promising student—he's already fully qualified—that is, if his word's to be taken for it."

"Why not?"

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"Why not, indeed? I know nothing about him, I tell you—no more than what he just chooses to assert, or invent. He may be a rascal, an adventurer."

"He was your host. Have you forgotten?"

"None of your impertinence. He's nothing to you, anyhow. Give me my hat—do you hear me?"

"Surely, dear, you're not going to the office in your dressing-gown and slippers?"

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CHAPTER II

THE United Service Stores are situated, as everybody knows, in Consort Street, London. They are an enormous emporium for the sale of every conceivable commodity, at co-operative rates, from a fiddler's kit to an officer's, or, more comprehensively, from a periwinkle to a palace. Their price catalogue has grown, like "Bradshaw," but in fewer years, from a booklet to a dictionary, and represents at this day perhaps some millions of pounds in invested capital. They are a sort of empire-central ever-fairing Nijni-Novgorod, into which the traffic of commerce pours its thousand streams, to deposit there, between its daily ebb and flow, a precipitate of gold-dust as thick as the sand in a water company's reservoir. And they give employment consequently to an army of officials of every grade, from the magnificent chairman of the board-room to the little over-worked carter's lad, who snuffles and chaunts all day on the tail-board of the Company's meanest wagon.

A very exact system of checks and tallies, a very rigorous drilling of the rank and file, are essential, as one may suppose, to the automatic movement of this huge complicated mill of barter. But even so, responsive through every detail of its machinery, the least wheel to the greatest and any part to the whole, there is still and always an extraneous influence to be taken into account in the perfect working of the system

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—and that is the section of the public that steals. It has to be perpetually calculated and provided against, and its peculations considered, up to a formidable figure, in the annual balance-sheet. And not the least of the evil is that it so reacts upon the service of the Company as to make suspicion a necessary condition of employment.

All possible precautions are taken, of course, against this recurrent scandal. The Company employs a little corps of plain-clothes detectives, who loiter through the various departments, with a guileful nonchalance, and possess expert memories. Practised offenders, when caught, are charged; more frequently the culprit (it is generally a woman) is politely invited to an interview with some departmental manager, is induced tearfully to disgorge, and is then released with a warning. Perhaps the moral ban is in itself an aggravation to a highly unimaginative sex. There are very few women, after all, who can understand why if they want a thing they shouldn't have it.

Mr. Roger Mandrake was inclined to laugh at the futility of the detectives. He was young, scarcely twenty-two, and supremely confident in his own cleverness. He believed that he, that any reasonably self-possessed person, could visit the Stores, during such a holiday crush as the present, and help himself pretty well to whatever he liked. Not by way of open theft—certainly not. His plan was to order goods at the counter, pretend to pay for them at the desk, worm his way back through the throng, loosely flourish his voucher in the eyes of the harassed shopman, secure his parcel, and retreat. He offered to prove his contention to Professor Urchin, if Professor Urchin for his part would undertake, in case of accidents, to hold him immune. And in a weak or elated moment the

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Professor had consented to the trial. A bet of ten shillings lay between them on the subject.

The department, of which the Professor was the learned and practical Director, was a comparatively recent addition to the Stores. It had been instituted in deference to that overwhelming growth in the antique cult which was characterising the dawn of the twentieth century. It comprised a library of second-hand books, a curio museum with priced exhibits, and a china closet. Adjoining was a huge room for the display of ancient furniture, pictures, and bijoutry. Here were Elizabethan four-posters, Tudor roundels, immense muniment chests, whole carved house fronts, stripped from doomed walls and re-erected for show and sale at an incalculable figure. The Professor had to know and pronounce upon them all. He lived in a little private office off the department, a sort of Delphic grotto, to which came those wishing to consult the oracle. The catholicity of his knowledge was astonishing. It was useless hoping to palm off on him a spurious antique. His tongue, his nose, the tips of his fingers were all so many delicate antennæ of touch and taste. He would just lick a piece of pottery, and date its glaze for you in a twinkling. His nose could run up the separate smells appertaining to all the dynasties of China, as a showman's lips run up his Pandean pipe, and give you an individual note on each. He had a ferret's eye for false worm-holes and fumigated oak. He was, in short, an encyclopædia of information in himself, and the Company gave him three hundred a year for his services to it. No wonder that he was always looking for treasure-trove.

He was. His hands were for ever in the dust-bins of the past, groping for it. His position had at least that advantage; it was prolific to him of the oppor-

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tunities which he coveted. Yet, it seemed, luck was determined to deny him to the last.

He was standing in one of his trances when Mr. Roger Mandrake was announced. A little volume, bound in old olive-coloured shagreen, was in his right hand, his forefinger between the leaves. The lenses of his spectacles seemed to glow with a concentrated lustre. He had that intense expression on his face which announced in him the consciousness of a "find." For all his acquisitiveness, the passion of the collector could burn in him wholly and disinterestedly.

He did not hear the young man address him a first or a second time; but at the third amused repetition of his name he came to earth with a shock and scowl. His greeting of his visitor was hardly cordial. He understood the reason of his coming; but here, in his office, with the fumes of pot-companionship long dissipated, he felt young Mandrake's insistence to be rather an impertinence, and would have thought better of him had he not presumed upon a foolish jest. It was with a rather sour disfavour that he laid the little book on the desk beside him, and looked into the good-humoured, confident face of the medical student.

It was an honest and open enough one, he might have admitted if his mind had not suffered a recent prejudice; but Pauline had insinuated a thought which warped his vision. He saw in this young man a potential and quite inadmissible suitor. However his nature might contradict itself in other respects, it was consistent in regarding his Pauline as the one priceless piece of goods in his possession. There was to be no moony trifling where she was concerned. If the hammer was ever to fall upon her, it should fall at a fortune and nothing less. Young impecunious fools must be taught not to take advantage of his

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condescensions to them. He was calculating entirely without his host, no doubt; but perhaps a certain guilty self-consciousness made him fanciful. He knew that he ought not to go to smoking-concerts with young men if he wanted dignified age and frolicsome youth to stand in their right relations to one another. And, after all, what did he know of *this* young man—a neighbour and casual acquaintance of a very recent date? He had called upon him, at his lodgings in St. Peter's Square, at his daughter's request—and that was all. The fellow might be an utter rascal for all he knew. Indeed, regarded through the atmosphere of the Stores, the youth's challenge, or proposition, was already assuming a sinister complexion. At any rate, his intrusion came particularly inopportune at the present moment, when his own mind was much exercised and excited over an alien matter. He could hardly attune it to a common civility.

"Well," he said icily, "I hope I see you very well."

"Very well, sir," answered young Mandrake, with a smile, "and well up to time, I believe."

"Up to—— ?" began the Professor. "Yes? you mean—— ?"

"You haven't forgotten our bet, I hope, sir? I'm going to win it. Ten bob will be an event to me."

"I trust it mayn't prove so," said the Professor crossly. "But you aren't serious—really?"

"Indeed I am."

"Have you thought of the risk?"

"What risk, sir? You don't forget you promised to hold me immune?"

"But supposing you are caught?"

"I shall ask to be brought to you, as we arranged, and you will explain to my captor, and hold me excused, and pocket the stakes. If I'm not caught,

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I shall come to you just the same, yield my plunder, and receive ten shillings for it."

"It's a foolish venture, at best; but——"

A crash as of breaking china outside the door interrupted him. He strode a rapid step or two and disappeared. A moment later Mandrake heard his voice in rigid denunciation.

"Very well, Stedding, that's your second carelessness in the year. I shall have to recommend your dismissal."

"A body bumped against me, sir."

"You shall explain that to the manager."

"If you recommend my dismissal, sir, I shall have to go."

"It's extremely likely, I think."

"I've served the Stores for ten years, sir, without a stain."

"You can mention that also."

"God forgive you, sir."

The Professor returned, with a smile upon his lips. He saw his visitor standing by his desk on which the little book lay. The young man's face was, or he fancied it, rather pale. He felt somehow called upon to justify himself.

"We have to exact a rigid discipline," he said.

"It seems a heavy punishment for a little fault, sir," answered Mandrake.

"No doubt, no doubt," said the Professor frigidly; "but light punishments, young man, make light responsibilities. Well, are you still determined?"

"O, yes!"

"In which department do you propose conducting your experiment?"

"In yours, sir, of course. I want to make certain of you in case of accidents. Besides, I couldn't go to

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a better in the matter of crush and all that. It was just swarming as I passed through. Antiquities are jolly popular in these days. You'll see; in ten minutes I shall be back with a parcel and an unstamped voucher."

"You aren't afraid?"

"Why should I be?"

"O, very well, very well! The thought of the public exposure might affect some people. I can't provide against that."

"But I'm so confident, you see, that there won't be any."

"You are, are you? Well, you must excuse me. I'm a servant of the Company, and can only hope, for its credit, that you'll find yourself mistaken."

"All right, sir. Now for it. I hope Miss Urchin is well?"

The Professor turned away without answering, and the young man left the room. The former had turned many ways, backwards and forwards, round and round, with a curious haste and excitement, before Mr. Mandrake came back to it, which he did under escort. The frank face was oddly subdued, but a light of deprecating mirth shone in its eyes. The detective, holding his captive by the arm, closed the door softly.

"Another case, sir," he said. "The young man wants a word with you."

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CHAPTER III

THE detective handed over a parcel, of which he had relieved his captive. The Professor received it mechanically, without uttering a word.

"It's Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers,' sir," said young Mandrake, with a faint giggle; "an old book: the title struck me as opportune. I've lost, and I've got to pay you ten shillings for it."

"It were ticketed at thirty-five pound, my man," said the detective, with an aggravated scorn. "But you needn't come that innercent game with us." He addressed the Professor. "The most deliberate thing I ever see, sir. He just made believe, among the crowd at the desk, to pay for the article, and then went and claimed it, trusting to the scurry at the counter, with an unreceipted bill. But he didn't play that game twice. I took him in the act, as he were bolting with his plunder."

Plunder! The boy, for all his impudence, flushed painfully. He had not quite realised, before the event, the demoralising effect of this official handling. A memory of surprised glances, of withdrawn skirts, burned in him hotly. That sudden alighting of an incriminating hand on his shoulder had seemed at a touch to take all the pith out of his venture. He was conscious suddenly of a feeling of distress, of palpitation, and wished that the Professor would be prompt to speak up and restore him to his self-respect.

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He was dwelling, in fact, nervously on that expected quittance, when, raising his eyes, half anxious, half jocund, their vision encountered the glow of intent spectacles focussed upon him from the height of a malign and rigid countenance. The pulse of his heart seemed to check itself with a shock and quiver.

"Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers,' hey?" The Professor appeared to bite out the words with difficulty from a half-locked jaw. "What made him think of that, Johnson? What made him, now?"

"The merest fluke, sir," said Mandrake. "The name caught my eye, and it seemed appropriate to the occasion. I've lost, Mr. Urchin; I own up. Do explain it all to this man, and let me get away and hide my diminished head."

To his astonishment, his horror, the sympathetic response to his appeal which he had looked for was not forthcoming. The Professor only turned, as rigid as frost, to his captor.

"Do you know him, Johnson?"

"Why, I've my suspicions, sir," answered the man. "He's been at it before, if I'm not very much mistaken."

"Mr. Urchin," cried the boy, thickly, as if his wits were being hypnotised, "what does all this mean? You must be joking, of course. You can't have forgotten our bet?"

The Professor shrugged his shoulders.

"I am free to confess, Johnson," he said, "that I know something of this young person; but nothing, yes, certainly nothing"—he screwed in his lips acridly—"definitely to his credit."

"Exactly, sir," said the detective. "It may have been part of his game to make up to you—a common trick of the trade."

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Mandrake pressed his forehead between his hands.

"Am I going mad?" he cried. "Didn't we have a bet of ten shillings on this very trick—whether I could carry it off with impunity or not? Didn't I leave you a moment ago to put it to the test, and didn't you promise to hold me immune if I failed?"

The Professor shrugged his shoulders a second time. The act might have implied anything, from incredulity to repudiation.

"You can't have designed such a devilish wickedness," cried the boy, his amazement flashing into scorn. "Or is it possible that your wits are woolgathering? They do sometimes, you know. Mr. Urchin! for God's sake, try to remember!"

The light from the spectacles seemed to con his anguish, inhumanly cold and emotionless.

"O, my God!" whispered the young fellow.

"What's to be done with him, sir?" asked the detective.

"Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers'!" The Professor seemed to be softly excogitating a problem. He repeated the title to himself several times. "Yes, yes," he muttered. "It was a happy choice, an opportune choice. A coincidence, of course, that he should have alighted on it."

He seemed to come to a sudden violent determination. His hands gripped one another; his teeth—they were a sound feature in him—clinched under his lifted lip.

"You must consent to being searched, young gentleman," he said, with an air of finality.

"Searched!" The boy started, and uttered the word in an amazed whisper. "Why?"

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"You may have other pilfered goods on you."

"It is a monstrous lie."

"It is an hypothesis, that's all."

"And a totally unfounded one."

"The detective knows you, he says."

"Don't *you* know me, sir?"

"I know you just enough to know that I know nothing whatever about you."

"You have been my guest, sir."

"The condescension, I am afraid, proved nothing to my credit."

That, at least, was an unhandsome assertion.

"Mr. Urchin," said the young fellow proudly, "I refuse to be searched."

His answer appeared completely to demoralise the Professor. That ungainly man repudiated on the spot the stately capital of his first title. He hissed, he snapped his fingers, he lifted up one foot after the other, as if he were marking time to some diabolical dance; I fear he uttered a common oath under his breath.

"Refuse!" he snarled—"refuse! But I say you shall be, young man."

"And I say I won't."

"O, now! doesn't that give you away? Johnson, doesn't it give him away?"

"I think so, sir, without a doubt."

"Come, now," said the Professor, advancing threateningly; "do you hear? Turn out your pockets without more to-do."

He seemed actually on the point of closing furiously with the youngster. The detective had to interpose his own body conciliatory.

"We've the means to make him, sir, if you wish it," he said.

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"What! to give him in charge, eh? to give him in charge?"

The Director of the Department of Antiquities came to a sudden pause, and leered evilly at his prisoner.

"You hear, Mr. Mandrake?" he said.

"You'll not do it, sir," answered the young man, in a broken voice. "It can't be true that you've forgotten our bet."

"O, stow that!" growled the detective disdainfully. He believed it, indeed, to be a ruse, and a sufficiently played-out one.

"I shall do it, and remorselessly, young sir," said the Professor, "if you persist in your obstinacy."

"I have taken nothing."

"Tell that to the marines."

The Professor, unfrocked as it were, could descend to the most scoffing vernacular.

"What do you accuse me of having taken?"

The detective pointed to the parcel significantly.

"That's enough," said the Professor, with a furious snap. "Turn out your pockets."

"I shall not."

"Johnson, put the handcuffs on him. I give him in charge."

"Mr. Urchin!"

"Put the handcuffs on, I say. He mustn't be given the chance to dispose of anything on his way to the police-court. Take him away. I shall follow in a moment."

The unhappy youth started back; then held out his hands. He was as pale as a sheet, but his lips were set in a curious stiff smile.

"For some reason of your own, old man," he whispered, "you are bent on wrecking my life. I shall call quits with you for that some day."

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For minutes after he was left alone the Professor stood frowningly pondering the floor.

"A dog," he muttered, "a dog! May the curse of a father pursue and ruin him."

He took his hat from a peg on the wall, and prepared to follow his victim to Lady Street.

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CHAPTER IV

MR. MANDRAKE'S escort conceded to the occasion the privacy of a four-wheeler, at his captive's charge. The magistrate was sitting at Lady Street Police Court, and thither they were driven straightway. Mr. Johnson preserved, as a matter of custom, his stolid official countenance; but within his human breast there certainly flickered a spark of curiosity.

"A bet, now, was it?" he murmured, as if in self-cogitation, rasping his leathery chin. "Fancy the Director condescending to that there sort of game with you! It's my duty to tell you, young man, that whatever you says will be took down in evidence against you."

"Why against me?" said Mandrake.

"It's the law," said the detective.

"Nonsense," answered the prisoner. "The law professes to hold every man innocent until he's proved guilty. Supposing what I said was clear evidence in my favour?"

"Then it would go for nothing," said Johnson; "and you may as well keep it to yourself."

The young man laughed unpleasantly.

"You're the sort of fool," he said, "that cunning old apes make a catspaw of. I suppose you're in the conspiracy?"

The detective removed his hat, wiped his forehead

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imperturbably with a red cotton handkerchief which he took from it, threw the article back into place, and rebonneted himself coolly.

"Apes or jackanapes," he said, "you'd know, if you had my experience, that there's a conspiracy, according to their own showing, against nine-tenths of the people that make free with other people's property."

Mandrake sneered horribly.

"And they're perfectly right," he said. "The whole of our cursed social system is in a combination to exaggerate their offence. A race of materialists. You may steal a man's brains, and even break open his head to do it, pretty well with impunity. But touch his paltry possessions and you're done."

He was nearly beside himself with the grief and horror of his situation. The blow had been so dumfoundering, so utterly unlooked for. He could not account for it in any way—could hardly make an attempt to in his present stunned condition.

"I wouldn't say any more, if I was you," said the detective.

"Say!" cried the boy. "I hardly know what I'm saying or doing."

"Don't you, now?" said Johnson. "Maybe you're a first offender, after all. It takes them that way now and again."

"But I'm not any offender, first or last."

"Well, all right, I hear you say it."

"That's with your official ears, I suppose—not with your human? I tell you it was a bet."

"It's no good telling *me*. Tell the magistrate."

"No, of course it's no good telling you. It's only your impartial business to lead me on to incriminate myself. I won't utter another word."

He sank back in his corner of the dreary vehicle, and

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was dumb thenceforth. The world of his familiar experience went by the windows like a diorama of monstrosities. The brand of the outcast was on him. He might hide, but could never repudiate it again. In one moment, through no fault of his own, he had been caught into the vast maelstrom of the submerged.

Mr. Crichel Shears was the stipendiary sitting at Lady Street. He was a rather notable man, very humane and polished, but with a quick wit for the humour of situations. He could no more resist an opportunity to score at a prisoner's or witness's expense than he could overlook the importance of extenuating circumstances. If amongst these was popularly to be counted a provocation, conscious or unconscious, to verbal pleasantries, it were rash for any prisoner to presume upon that understanding. The magistrate's tongue was as impartial in pronouncing a sentence as it was ready in decorating it. It was a pleasure to be convicted by him. An atmosphere of pantomime seemed to accompany one's clownish transformation, and one skipped into the police-van with a sense as of having taken one's part creditably in a scene of excellent merriment. It is the gift of humour, after all, that makes us men and brothers.

Mandrake, received officially like any other legal parcel, awaited his turn to be put into the dock with hardly a consciousness of emotion. He had arrived at this point mechanically. He was to all virtual purposes deaf and blind to outer impressions. His vision was introspective—a nightmare dream of oppression, physical and mental. A ceaseless, meaningless thunder seemed to boom in his ears.

Suddenly he was conscious of being advanced tentatively, under pressure. A section of the court, murmuring like a shell, dotted with white faces,

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opened upon him through a door. There was a prisoner standing where in another moment he would have to stand—a jaunty little pert-faced rapscallion, with tumbled red hair and a pointed tag of red beard. He was holding on to the dock-rail, and sniggering joyously. Somehow the sight sent a thrill of hope and relief through the observer's bosom.

A figure, enthroned on a sort of divan against the wall, nodded forward, its arms elbowed on its chair, its fingers clasped in front of it. Its face was a little suggestive of a shrewdly expressionless sheep; its apparel was the conventional flawless, but sober, apparel of the prosperous citizen. If you could have peeped under the desk where the figure's feet were easily disposed, you would have gathered that Mr. Crichel Shears was vain of his boots. They were only eights, but polished, one might say, up to the nines.

"You needn't tell us what you said to yourself," the magistrate was insisting, in a very soft, clear voice. "That isn't evidence, you know."

"Isn't it?" said the prisoner. "Now, if the constable is positive he heard me swear, is that evidence?"

"Certainly it is."

"Well, I was swearing to myself."

"But you weren't swearing *at* yourself. Never mind that, however. The charge against you is for obstructing the police in the execution of their duty, and further for refusing to give your name and address when requested."

"Your worship, it is a fact that I was going to interview this lady suffragist, when she was arrested before my eyes. I only just tapped the officer on his helmet, and said, 'Is that polite, when she was wanting to speak to me?'"

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"I understand. You thought his action unmanly; so you bonneted him."

"I had lost my own hat in the row. I put that to the officer, but he couldn't see it."

"So you knocked his helmet over his eyes to make it plain to him. You stated yourself to be a surveyor of customs. Is that true?"

"It's true that I stated myself to be one."

"Well, are you one?"

"Yes; I'm a journalist."

"Will you give me your name?"

"With respect, sir, certainly not. I shall give that only to the lady of my choice."

"That will do. I shall remand you for a week. Next case."

Struggling and protesting and giggling in one, the little red man was, to a babble of laughter, removed from the dock, and Mandrake was motioned forward to take his place. Still like something mechanical, obedient to the touch of a lever, he advanced and came to a stop. Once, in early youth, he had pondered going into the Church; had pictured himself moving vast audiences from the height of a pulpit. In all his dreams he had never foreseen himself as now, penned into such a tribune, preaching such a lesson to a gloating crowd. With a desperate hand he swept the blindness from his eyes, the deafness from his ears.

The magistrate was speaking impatiently.

"Now, then, what is the charge? Who signed the sheet? Where is he?"

Mandrake saw the malignant face of his accuser, lowering and inscrutable, pass suddenly into the witness-box; and he stood up stiff, and braced himself for the ordeal.

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CHAPTER V

THE proceedings in this their first stage were formal and brief. Little more than the questions of identification and accusation were gone into. The prisoner, now that the sword was actually impending over his head, finding his wits and his resolution to an extent astonishing to himself, reserved his defence, with the statement that he had a perfect answer to the charge, and was remanded, like the other, for a week.

During this brief interval of the fear, and the test, and the dismissal to a temporary respite, a curious change seemed to have come over the boy's nature. That had been an easy and a happy enough one, taking the world, its gifts and blows, lightly, accepting honestly its share of work and fun—neither Sybarite nor ascetic, but inclining, if either way, to the balance of virtue. Above all, it had been a perfectly ingenuous nature, tinctured with a little wholesome conceit—nothing great, but just sufficiently the fruit of a reserve which courted only a limited contact with its fellows. A certain bashfulness, indeed, which was by far the youngster's predominant characteristic, was also his greatest recommendation, especially in the eyes of the sex which often affects without having it, and which could find that quality particularly engaging when franked by an athletic figure, a good, irregular, but

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pleasing face, and voice and plenteous goldish hair both of strong masculine fibre. The poor fellow had been, in short, a reasonably commonplace youth, without any particular guile, fairly clever, and genuinely interested in his profession.

The touch of the handcuffs had changed all that. Hitherto he had accepted the social order, uncritically, as part of the unquestionable principle of things. He had been content to live by it and to trust in it. Its treachery took him like an unexpected blow from a friend. Henceforth he was to be at war with the society which had proved its utter impotence to defend and vindicate him in a simplest question of right and wrong. He saw that it was within the power of any evil mind to inflict the brand which could never be effaced. He might be exonerated—acquitted. He did not seem much to care at the moment. Could "all the perfumes of Arabia" ever again sweeten those defiled wrists of his? He had been manacled as a suspected thief, and the blot of the criminal was against his name. Society should be held responsible for that abuse of a clean faith which had trusted in it. How, he did not quite know. His heart was only affected with a poisonous resentment which he was confident must bear fruit. The devil, in all this moral confusion, was the one power to serve and propitiate. He recognised now how all the real successes of the world were due to his hands.

So, from irresponsible youth, he had come at a blow to man's bitter estate; to a perspicacious scepticism; into the kingdom of disbelief. He must use the weapons of his succession—craft, and inhumanity, and egotism. The only sentiment which appeared to remain to him out of the old was wonder. "*Why did he do it?*" That sentiment, no doubt, was a bequest

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from immaturity. Why did any man commit evil but for his selfish ends? Yet it was hard to see the end here. Perhaps it would be revealed to him when the week had passed.

In the meantime he had ample opportunity to reflect upon the answer. They had boxed him into a cubicle —one of a double row—in a horrible den on wheels, and driven him off to prison. There were seven or eight others with him but apart from him, amongst them the red-headed man, and they were all manacled again before being entered. He rather hugged that disgrace on its repetition. It seemed to confirm his purpose to him. Now he had put his lips to the cup, he was eager to drain it, to taste the bitterness of the dregs, to acclimatise himself to the new world it opened out to him. That was the true, unblushing one, after all—life with the tinsel of affectation stripped from it.

But the ride, for all his false stoicism, was horrible. He was shaken, half-demented by the time he reached the prison and his cell in that grim pile. Here, though unconvicted and on remand, he was classed with the branded—condemned to submit to all the pains and humiliations of an undiscriminating system—solitude, periodic searching, cell-cleaning, convict diet. With all that fruitless time on his hands he ceased to wonder, as he had often wondered before, how Raleigh had succeeded in writing the History of the World in prison. He felt that he himself could have written the history of a suffering human heart—a much more voluminous production.

He wrote a few letters—one to his aunt—his sole relative, and rather grudging benefactor—giving his true version of the case, but offering to dispense with all assistance from her for the future, if she desired it.

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She answered, in terms of informal condemnation, but tendering a sum for legal advice, if *he* desired it. He had perfectly foreseen, in his new-born cynicism, how it would be; and he returned the cheque, gratefully as regarded favours foregone, with an intimation that he preferred to stand and plead upon his own consciousness of innocence, and that for the future he proposed making out his career unassisted. As to his profession, he felt that that for good and all was closed to him. He had never much favoured the typical student mind. Sordid and cynical, it was apt to touch his moral sensitiveness on the raw. There were examples of it, of course, a leavening proportion, which, as in all mixed communities, deodorised the mass, and preserved the traditions of health. From any future fellowship with such his contaminated thoughts shrank; with the rest they would have nothing to do. By both, he believed in his wounded soul, he would be equally cold-shouldered. He had never been a fellow much inclined to friendships; and the man who is careless of friendship in prosperity is every man's enemy in adversity. He was inclined to conclude everything wretched and bad about humankind; he met every trouble half-way; the whole world seemed suddenly to be revealed to him, as to the citizen in Hawthorne's tale, a commonwealth of devil-worshippers, secret and unholy. He wondered, uglily, if the Professor's daughter were in the conspiracy—if that seemingly frank impertinence, which had a little stirred his heart and his blood at a distance, were nothing but a practised art of the decoy. He pondered, indeed, a whole volume of grotesque possibilities during the long, solitary days of his remand; for his pride had rejected all help from without, insisting that to plead innocence through a lawyer was enough in

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itself to imply a suspicion of its genuineness. Of what moral benefit could acquittance prove to him, unless his probity were able to vindicate itself without calling in the arts of counsel? We can see by that that he was not so completely emancipated as he fancied himself to be.

Regularly, in the degrading daily parades, he saw the little red-headed man, and the sight of him was always somehow a comfort. There was a Bohemian, independent air about the creature which was even exhilarating in that dismal atmosphere of spikes and sullen boundaries. "Stone walls," it was evident, could not *his* "prison make." They were not permitted to speak together; but the little man did not fail, through a telegraphic code of winks and wiggles, to convey to him a sense of the joke of their condition. And, in the light of his impish confidences, it actually seemed to become a joke to Mandrake during those fitful moments.

And then at last the period to these initial torments was reached, and he was re-packed into the cubicle, and driven back to Lady Street.

The red-headed man went with him. He appeared by now to have satisfied his desire for solitude; for when the magistrate re-demanded his name, he gave it, and with such an air of five-foot haughtiness that the Court lapsed into helpless laughter.

"Festus le Touzel," said the magistrate, smiling, as he made a note of it. "You are dismissed with a caution, upon your undertaking to keep the peace for six months."

Mr. le Touzel, folding his arms, and scowling a fierce moment on the tittering throng, addressed the magistrate with the utmost suavity.

"I will do anything to oblige you, Mr. Shears,

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however great the tax you put upon my good-nature."

"There, go away," said the magistrate; and Mr. le Touzel descended, stately but truculent still, to enter into his recognisances in form.

Mandrake was conscious of a feeling as of physical stiffness as he stood up in the dock. But he felt quite self-possessed—in the sense of that new and eviler self which had come to claim him. He saw the eyes of the magistrate, shrewd and rather curious, conning him; and he could meet their inquisition fearlessly. He looked about him then for the figure of his persecutor, and could detect it nowhere in the throng. While he was wondering, impatient, even, over its absence, a gentleman, of a formal legal aspect, arose in the body of the Court to address the magistrate; and the following colloquy ensued:—

"I have to ask your worship's permission. The Company, which I represent, proposes to offer no evidence against this prisoner."

"The case is one, I see"—the magistrate examined his charge-sheet—"of feloniously abstracting goods from the United Service Stores without payment. Is your action tantamount to withdrawing the accusation, Mr. Shipley?"

"I am instructed, your worship, that the Company sees no chance of a conviction should the case be submitted to a jury."

The pale-blue eyes of Mr. Crichel Shears consulted the prisoner's face.

"Are you represented?" he asked.

The young man shook his head faintly. He could find no words to reply. This sudden turn in events had unnerved him as no false evidence could have done.

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"Would you wish to be?"

He found voice then—a hoarse, trembling mockery of his own.

"If I were guilty, yes. There is no word of truth in it all. I could have answered the charge truthfully if I had been given the chance. This is worse, more unfair, than trying to bring it home to me—cowardly—a horrible thing."

There was a short silence.

"I recall," said the magistrate presently, "that when I remanded you, you submitted that you had a complete answer to the charge."

"I had, sir," answered the boy brokenly. "My act was the result of a bet between myself and Mr. Urchin, the Director of the Antiquities Department. I——"

Mr. Shipley interposed hurriedly.

"I am instructed, your worship, that the Company, anticipating this line of defence, has decided to accept it as implying a misunderstanding, and to give the prisoner, in short, the benefit of the doubt."

"I am not at all satisfied," said the magistrate, after a short pause. "What the accused asserts is true, or it is false."

"The question of bets, your worship, is open to many interpretations."

"Quite true, Mr. Shipley; but I should not like to imply that your client is a welsher."

"He is a gentleman of the highest probity, your worship," responded the lawyer indignantly.

"Very likely; but I should have thought better of him if he had come to vindicate his action in person. The accused is discharged."

"Your worship," began the lawyer, flaming angrily, "Mr. Urchin——" But the magistrate interrupted him—

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"He may claim, on the strength of his name, to play a boy's tricks; but we are not, in this Court, going to have Mandrakes pulled up by the root just to hear them scream."

And with the sound of this pleasantry in his ears the acquitted was dismissed into the street.

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CHAPTER VI

DAZED, unsteady, insensible for the moment of any purpose or direction in his flight, Mandrake was edging his way mechanically among the passengers in the street, when a voice spoke in his ear—

"Why did he do it?"

It was the question eternally in his own mind. He turned stupidly, and saw the little red-headed man, grinning and hatless, beside him.

"Come and have a drink," said this odd person.

The boy shook his head.

"What was that you said to me?" he asked. "Why did he do it?"

"Yes, faith; and I'm spoiling for an answer."

"So am I. You've reminded me. I'm on my way to ask him for one."

"O, no, you're not!"

The young athlete made an evil lip, looking down at this presumptuous interloper.

"O! Are you going to prevent me, *Mr. le Touzel?*" he asked.

"You needn't imply anything personal about my name," answered the other, with dignity; "I didn't adopt it to suit myself. An Irish princess thought fit to take it, anyhow, from an old lord of Picardy, and I've the blood of two fighting races at my knuckle-ends."

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"Well, I'll fight you, if you like. But weren't you just now bound over to keep the peace?"

"Faith, that's true. And I must have a taste of the real liberty before."

"I hope so for me. I won't pretend that I wasn't intentionally offensive. If you think my apologies—the apologies of an unconvicted thief—worth anything, take them."

The little journalist grasped his hand effusively.

"You're a man, my boy," he said. "I make allowances. Now don't you go and kick up a row. That's not the way to get the sort of justice you want."

"I should have thought——" began Mandrake.

"Ah!" quoth the other, interrupting him; "but that's all from my excessive love of liberty—not other people's, you know, but just my own. Hang the Suffragettes anyway. I wanted a taste of the cells to correct an over-long dose of it. It's always the way with me. When I find I'm going stale on the free rights of man, I kick up a trifling shindy, and get put away. It's marvellous what a week's treatment will do in the matter of restoring one's appetite for independence. Didn't you find it so?"

"It was my first experience. Freedom had never staled on me."

"Ah! you're young. Now don't flounce. You'll learn the moral necessity of a purgatory in time. We must suffer if we would enjoy. Where are you going?"

"I told you."

"Now listen to this. You've been victimised by a welsher, to adopt the magistrate's picturesque term, and the confounding of welshers is by the way of the law, not the fists."

"The law!"

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He echoed the word with a scornful bitterness.

"Well," said the little man reasonably. "What have you to complain of it anyway? It can't prevent false charges being brought, but it can pronounce on their merits when they are. I don't doubt Mr. Shears would help you, if you tipped him a hint, to make your absentee prosecutor give up an answer to that same question of yours."

"I shan't tip him the hint, then. For the future I'm my own counsellor and confidant in fighting the world."

"That means you're forestalling the world's verdict. I won't say you're not right about that, and I admire your spirit. But I, for one, should like to be your friend."

"In the devil's name, why?"

"I'm a journalist, to begin with, and you're a queer case. Then we've been comrades in purgatory, and have both been released on indulgences—bad cess to the conditions of mine! You mightn't think it again, but it's fair heaven to me to circumvent a rogue, and the fairer, the nicer the problem he offers. And, to top up, as you seem to contradict me in every detail of your nature and appearance, I'm looking to love you as a good fighting enemy."

"I don't quite see the logic of your conclusion."

"My dear man, the human race survives on illogic. Look at the unphilosophic basis of all our protective sentiment. We fondly foster in our children the delusion of our being their fine, impregnable, fate-controlling guardians; and they believe us, and trust in our omnipotence. And then one night comes a trifling hitch in our machinery, and in the morning we are deaf and dumb to their most heart-broken and heart-breaking appeals. There's the game up; yet

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even so, being the emotional creatures we are, it must go on, and no dismissing our progeny, like the birds and beasts, to fare for themselves the moment they can bite and fight. We're bred on illogic, and the sooner you recognise it, the sooner you'll be for excusing society for pronouncing no crime criminal that hasn't been 'had up,' and no virtue virtuous that has."

"I recognise it now, if you like. I want to get a practical equivalent for my loss of faith, that's all."

The little red man smacked palm into fist.

"That's the way to regard it," he said. "We'll bleed that rogue, Society, but by way of all the constitutional methods if you please. What are your plans, Roger?"

"I haven't got a plan in the world, Festus."

He lent himself, savagely amused, ironic, with a feeling between mockery and despair, to the singularity of the occasion. What did it matter, or anything matter? Was he not from this moment a vagabond, an outcast, without home or means or purpose? Yes, purpose, perhaps—the one purpose to fathom his persecutor's in thus ruining him. That was to be the single object henceforth of his broken life, and in the pursuit of that end he was already reckless.

"Come now, then," said his self-constituted acquaintance, "be guided by me."

The young fellow laughed insolently.

"All right," he said. "Where to? Ireland or Picardy? it's all one to me."

"Mr. Mandrake," said the journalist stiffly, "I'm at home in Gray's Inn, if you'll excuse me—attic quarters and attic fare, but maybe spiced with a little Attic salt. My hospitality, for what it's worth, is entirely at your service."

The young man bowed with solemnity.

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"Lead on, brave Festus," he said; "and regard me as your most obliged and humble client."

The other responded, unbending.

"I shall be interested in discussing this matter with you, sir. You can command my services as a free-lance of journalism. Maybe I can prove of help to you. 'Why did you do it?' That, I presume, is our cartel to the Company?"

"To the Director of its Antiquities Department, sir."

"I note the distinction. Excuse my unbonneted condition. I lost my helm in the last tilt."

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CHAPTER VII

MISS PAULINE URCHIN put down, with amazement in her fine eyes, the morning paper.

"Papa! Is this *our* Mr. Mandrake?"

It was Boxing Day, and a holiday, and the Professor, ensconced, in dressing-gown and slippers, in an easy-chair before the fire, was engaged in examining intently a little green shagreen-covered note-book. He caught the astonished inflection, and, lowering his spectacles from their perch on his forehead, turned and scowled balefully at the young woman.

"I don't know what you mean by *our* Mr. Mandrake."

"This name—this person, charged in the police reports with having stolen a book from the Stores?"

"If you mean the young man, our neighbour, for whom you have always shown an unaccountable penchant——"

"That's utter nonsense——"

"But about whom *I* have always had my doubts——"

"Though you accepted his invitations to smoking-concerts."

"It is the same—yes."

Pauline, rather white, sank back in her chair.

"And you," she said, "were his accuser, his prosecutor?"

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"I had no choice."

"What had he done?"

"He had presumed upon his acquaintance—his very casual acquaintance with me—to visit my department, and abstract from it, without payment, a book—a very unique and valuable book."

She was panting a little through parted lips.

"He can't have meant it. It must have been a joke. Mr. *Mandrake*—with that honest face, and such a good record!"

She reached out for the paper again, and reconsulted it.

"Why, it was the day before yesterday—the day after the concert—the very morning you told me——"

The Professor bounced to his feet.

"Silence!" he shouted furiously. "I won't hear another word. The fellow's a thief and rascal—he refused to be searched—he——"

"Why should he be searched?" she struck in, weeping now and indignant. "What did you expect to find on him—love-letters?"

The Professor, quite beyond himself, tore up and down the room, and flounced to a stop.

"You minx!" he spluttered—"you ineffable minx! You'd been corresponding with him, had you?"

"It *was* love-letters, then," she said; "and you invented the other just so that you might have an excuse for turning out his pockets. O, what a mean trick!"

The Professor fought for breath.

"If I thought," he panted—"if I thought——"

She rose to her feet. Her emotion combining with her natural lameness sent her suddenly staggering. The father stopped on the instant, and passed his hand across his forehead.

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"Pussy," he said miserably, "for pity's sake assure me that it isn't that—that you don't care about the fellow."

"I shall tell you nothing," she answered sullenly.

"Don't," he entreated, "set a whim against my true affection. What is any love to mine—your dear old daddy's? Your poor foot, child. I would sacrifice the whole world against a chance to make that sound for you."

She turned upon him unsoftened.

"What has that to do with your behaviour to Mr. Mandrake?"

"It has a great deal," he said, "if you only knew."

She gazed at him with wet, frowning eyes.

"You are very inscrutable, papa. It is part of your business, I daresay, and useful in imposing on ignorant people. But I know you, you see. You are thinking to obscure the point by pretending to have had some secret reason for your act beyond my comprehension. But you needn't pretend with me. We women are famous for our intuition, you see; and it's no good telling me, because I know better, that I wasn't right in my first conclusion. Poor Mr. Mandrake!"

The Professor leapt to the goad once more.

"O, my stars!" he screeched, positively skipping; "O, twenty fiddle-sticks' ends! Poor him, would you? poor this young thief and libertine? I rejoice in my act—I am justified in it, doubly and trebly—he has my complete scorn and detestation—catch him now if you can!" And with a glare and scornful fling of his arm, as if he were actually throwing that shadowy puppet of his hate in her face, the Professor, completely demoralised, danced out of the room. A few minutes later Pauline heard him bang the door of the house.

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Such ebullitions, though in a modified form, were not uncommon in her experience. There was a strain of excessive excitability in the Professor, which was wont to flame up out of all proportion with its provocations. But it had certainly never before so amounted to a self-abandonment. The memory of that exaggerated display lingered amazedly in the girl's heart, battling with its shocked distress. She did not for a moment believe in young Mandrake's guilt. But could her father, discrediting it no less, really have been capable of so execrable a treachery as to assume, or invent it, for his own catch-correspondence ends? She found that, for all her naughty denunciation of her parent, equally incredible. There was something else, something more deadly behind. He was not an inhuman man—not more than most collectors. The book could only have been a pretext.

She felt very unhappy anyhow, and sought distraction in her window-boxes. Pauline, like many women of a robust and lively disposition, had a great tenderness for flowers, and a great skill in handling them. Spiritual temperaments are very exquisite things, but is it not the practical ones that grow the heads of blossom finest to our eyes and sweetest to our sense of smell? Pauline effected a good deal on very little material bought with very little money—sometimes, indeed, with old clothes or kitchen stuff. Her nursery beds were the barrows of itinerant vendors; but somehow her crocus and hyacinth bulbs, and her pots of primula and spiræa and azalea seemed to luxuriate into prize specimens, where others bought by other people from the selfsame hawkers developed only a common mediocrity. There was something bounteous about Pauline, soul and figure, though she did talk scandal. She belonged to the guild of Nature's

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nurses, which is franked by no diplomas. The children of her sympathies waxed sweet and fat in her mere atmosphere. No doubt the amplitude of her proportions is stupendous in these days; but I am treating of the time when she was nothing but a simple Nature's handmaiden. That is the bother of it. The milk of human kindness is like Mercy—"it blesseth him that gives and him that takes;" it is very fattening to a healthy constitution. Selfish people so often keep the best figures in the end.

The ensuing week passed in mutinous wise. Father and daughter were on terms of mutual courtesy; but excessive politeness in some households denotes an abnormal condition of strain. At the end of the week, one morning Pauline stood up with the newspaper, as her father entered to breakfast, and tapped a paragraph under his nose. Her voice was very measured and quiet.

"It is as I foresaw, papa. He declares he did it for a bet—and with you."

He pushed the sheet away frigidly, and went about his breakfast with a very set face.

"Papa, why did you not follow up your charge?"

"Because," he answered between his teeth, "I had no longer an object in doing so."

"An object!" she addressed him, amazed. "What object could there have been but the theft of the book? and that was the same as at the first hearing."

"Hold your tongue!" he said sharply. "I'm hardly called upon to explain and defend myself before my child."

"I should have thought," she answered, "that that should have been your chief anxiety. But never mind. I am glad the poor fellow has been exonerated. *I* shouldn't much have liked——"

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She had been going to add "the magistrate's remarks, if I had been in your place," but she checked the words on her too-ready tongue. There was something in her father's aspect so dejected, so crushed even, that her heart of hard raillery died in her. Her eyes were even full of tears as she turned away; but those winking drops were not all for him; they sprang from at least one other sentiment besides.

He rose presently, rather heavily, and doffed his dressing-gown for his business garb—a fusty, ill-fitting frock-coat. Out in the hall his hat was hanging on a peg—a bran-new article which Pauline had given him for a Christmas present. It hardly came low enough on his forehead to please him; he preferred something a little oversized and enveloping—something that reached his ears, and had not to be thought of at windy corners. But girls had their notions, and the gift was endeared to him by the giver. He perched it on his head ruefully, resisting a strong temptation to make a football of the thing. It seemed at the moment his crown of happier days. He could not depose himself from that threatened kingdom.

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CHAPTER VIII

GRAY'S Inn, like many another of the old London Inns of Court, has long ceased to be an exclusive domicile of the law. Its Benchers may still maintain something of their ancient "extra parochial" dignity, but it is in spite of the atmosphere of lay sacrilege which has come to envelope their holiest traditions. From a comparatively early age impecunious literary men, and such-like unconsidered starvelings, have sought sanctuary in its dusty cloisters; and it would be hard to enumerate the names of those, refugees from the law rather than its accredited exemplars, who have roosted in its neglected attics. Among them indeed have been such "bright particular stars" as Oliver Goldsmith, Chapman of "Homer" fame, the eccentric antiquary Ritson, and Dr. Rawlinson the bookworm, whose chambers were stuffed so full of Alduses and Elzevirs that he had to go to bed in the passage. In modern days it is our business to refer to no other, greater or lesser, than Mr. Festus le Touzel.

Festus had a solitary bachelor chamber under the roof of one of the Gardens' buildings. None of the supplementary courts for him. He would carry that distinction on his address, though, to boast it, every visitor who came to call upon him must be as grossly foreshortened to his eyes, looking from above, as is a *diva* to the eyes of a denizen of the half-crown gallery

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at the Opera. But there is a distinction in being one, however situated, at an Opera audience.

Festus could make money, even more freely than he could spend it, when he chose. But he very seldom chose. He delighted in considering himself a genuine free-lance of literature—knight-errant, explorer, free-booter, as the mood occurred to him. He had been prominent in engineering the hidden-treasure craze; he was ingenious at devising catch-penny problems for the newspapers; there was no hand like his in the old city for inventing stop-column extravagances that were made to meet the eye, and draw the purse, and be contradicted next day under a flaming headline. A frivolous, or thoughtful, or technical article ran with equal facility off his pen. Every now and again, civilisation palling and the wild Irishman coming uppermost in him, he would break a head or a window, and go into retreat for a spell. He had no shame or conscience about such things; and yet he was vain of his address. That was the Irishman again. He appeared utterly immoral in essence; and yet in the concrete he was always a likeable little snob.

It may be assumed from this that Festus was without balance. Well, he himself called it bias. He was governed by impulse, if that is not to pronounce a paradox. And certainly he could be on occasion, and on long occasion if necessary, as secret, as persistent, as deadly as a Corsican vendettist.

His "chambers," *alias* attic, were very much the man. They were victualled and appointed, like an explorer's cache, rather as against chance visits than an habitual occupation. Condensed meats, a little gas-stove, a few books, several photographs of the tenant, a turn-up bedstead, some spare handkerchiefs and collars, comprised their essential furniture.

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Sometimes he would be absent from them for weeks on end. Occasionally he would shut himself into them for days. He paid his rent, however; and that was not the least of his inconsistencies.

On the afternoon of their common restoration to society, he and Mandrake sat in this lofty eyrie, discussing biscuits and beef-tea and the problem most personal to the younger man. It invited, it was evident, no immediate solution. At the end, the question "Why did he do it?" was as remote from suggesting its own answer as it had been any time these seven days. The boy had stated his facts, formal and emotionless, after his new manner of cynical apathy; but sincerity had not so ceased to be an essential of his nature as to leave the listener for one moment in doubt as to their unadorned accuracy. He was actually interested in the case, and from some characteristic points of view. The young fellow attracted him, for one; for another, the riddle, *per se*, appealed to his romantically professional side; thirdly, he could foresee great credit and profit to himself in the successful exploiting of a scandal of such dimensions. All considered, he was resolved to make the victim's cause his own.

"So, to tot up," said he, "the solitary clue seems to be that Antrobus book."

"I took it quite haphazard," protested the other listlessly. "The name caught my eye, and it seemed a good joke to make it the text of our dispute. Besides, he himself remarked upon it as a coincidence."

"Did he, now? But that was ironic, no doubt. There was something, maybe, suggested the idea of intention to him. What was that, I wonder?"

"O! how can I tell?"

"You can't, of course. I'm thinking, would any

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other chance choice of yours have affected him quite in the same way?"

"I suppose so."

"Yes, to be sure, you suppose so. Didn't he put it, now, to the detective, what made you think of that particular book?"

"Yes, he did."

"He concluded you'd an especial object in securing it?"

"Of course not. Why should he?"

"I don't know. You couldn't have paid for it in any case, I suppose?"

"Paid? Thirty-five pounds?"

"No, of course not. I'm wondering, now, if we could get hold of a copy of that same work?"

"What? at the price?"

"Just a squint of it, say. But we'll put that on one side for the moment. What are you going to do?"

The young man rose hurriedly.

"A useful reminder," he said. "Not to sit down and suffer in silence, at least. I'm going to put the question to his face."

Le Touzel reflected, squatting on a box.

"Well," he said, "nothing can be lost, or gained, perhaps, by that. I'm not indisposed to it. Wait a bit, and I'll come with you."

"I don't think that's necessary. What could you do?"

"Keep calm, sir. I don't propose bearding the old man myself. But I'll be waiting for you outside. I'm not going to lose sight of you, or abandon you just now to your own perilous company. What's my interest, anyway, but a friendly one?"

"I beg your pardon, Festus."

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"That's the way, Roger. I've taken a mighty fancy to you, my boy, and I've made up my mind to see you through with this. Of course, if you're for your old quarters——"

"I've done with them; I've done with all my past; I owe no man anything but my scorn and hatred, and no woman either."

"Then I, for one, will pay you like a Christian—a second cheek to the smiter. We'll share my chambers till you're righted, Roger."

"You're very good; but——"

"I'm neither good nor bad, but just a journalist spoiling for copy. Are you going to the Stores?"

"No; it's Saturday. He'll be home early. I'm going to St. Peter's Square."

"I should never have thought of that, now. Where's my hat? O, thunder! I forgot. I shall have to buy one by the way, and I have nothing but elevenpence to my credit. Never mind. Bare heads are the vogue. I'll look out for a barrow."

They were not so commonly the vogue, nevertheless, but that the wild red head excited considerable interest in the streets by way of which it flitted. Normally, Mandrake would have shrunk ashamed from his supplementary share in this popular attention; now, outcast and vagabond, he would admit in himself no such sentiment as his flaming cheeks seemed to express.

They walked all the miles-long way, up Holborn, up the Edgware Road, round, a long sweep, by Westbourne Grove, and so, halting short of the street they sought, turned, on the journalist's initiative, into the Portobello Road, which, for all its resounding name, presented a crowded and rather squalid appearance.

"I have always avoided this street hitherto—tried to

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forget it was my neighbour," said Mandrake soberly. "It was a very silly pretension."

"Ah!" replied Festus. "It's as good a place as any other, my boy, for hunting up the Philosopher's Stone; and to learn to regard it without prejudice is to be half-way already to that same treasure-trove. The question for me is that I want a hat for elevenpence, and I shouldn't get it in Piccadilly. Look at this old rag and fancy shop, now, with the coster's barrow outside festooned with rabbit-skins. Here's the place for me."

Mandrake shrunk back a little.

"You don't mean to say you're going in there?"

"Indeed I do. This is where the second-hand boots and slops come to a market, and the husbands' cast-off 'toppers' that the missuses exchange to the old-clothes men for things 'all agrowing and ablowing.' I'm going to acquire wisdom by deputy. A philosopher's hat for me."

He disappeared through the door, and Mandrake awaited his return with a curious feeling between repugnance and amusement. In a few minutes the little man re-emerged, crowned triumphantly with a deplorable article which had once been a silk hat, but which had long outlived its fashion and its pile.

"I take a large size," he said, "and the choice was limited. But there was a quality in the head which this adorned—I feel its wisdom already being transmitted to me—and I got it for tenpence."

They walked on together in silence, and presently, branching to the left, came out into the Ladbroke Grove Road and the neighbourhood of St. Peter's Square. And, almost on the instant, Mandrake caught his companion's arm, halting him.

"What is it, Roger?"

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"Nothing, Festus—his daughter, that's all."

She was advancing slowly, with her slight limp, right in the face of them. The recognition, it was plain, was mutual. It was as plain that her cheek was losing its colour a little as she approached. She came, passed, stopped and turned.

"Mr. Mandrake," she said in a low voice, "may I speak to you a moment?"

Festus raised his magnificent headgear—with difficulty, for the brim was limp—and sauntered apart, strutting and whistling.

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CHAPTER IX

THEY may have paced fifty yards together without exchanging a word. The weight of feeling which that silence expressed was not easily to be put off. Pity, shame, deep sympathy on the one hand; pride, mortification, deep grievance on the other, kept them dumb. They had never been so near to one another yet—not even at that subscription dance where they had lately met and been introduced, and where they had waltzed together(for Pauline, for all her limp, was light-footed), weaving, unconsciously, the first meshes of the thrall which was to end in snaring their own young feet. She had rested in his arm, then, against his right side, to which he had transferred his heart for the occasion; but not then as now had Sorrow come to cement their union through division. Though this sorrow held them apart it held them together—a coupling far beyond that other in significance. A young man, according to our conventions, owes a young lady no explanation for embracing her waist, on the most formal introduction, and whispering confidences, generally inane, into her ear, while he twirls her about. Here the necessity of an explanation implied the sort of bond which the other lacked. It is one thing to be partners in a dance; it is quite another to be partners in a tragic secret. Their steps did not trip it now, or their tongues. Love, in the meantime, hid behind a board advertising a sermon on

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"The New Theology," and tested the string of his bow with a little rose-pink finger.

At length, desperately, hurriedly, Pauline broke the silence. She had no choice, indeed, for her companion seemed obstinately bent on declining that responsibility.

"I have so wanted to see you—speak to you—to tell you how sorry I am that this has happened."

At that the young fellow expanded his chest to an in-drawn hiss, and relieved it of an extremely disagreeable laugh.

"Well, so am I," he said—"sorrier even than you, perhaps."

"O! I don't think so, indeed," she answered earnestly. "I don't think you can be."

He glanced at her, and as quickly away. Though his will struggled sullenly to resist its own undoing, his ears could not but be affected by the sweet quality of the voice addressing him. It was always low, rather grave in tone—a voice curiously contradictory of the vivacious character it expressed. Now, an added note of huskiness in it seemed to confess his right to a share in its more moving confidences.

Strive as he would, he could not resist a second swift glance. It proved fatal to his resolution. It had been possible to scorn the appeal of mere beauty and its meretricious adornments—such as a fur cap set coquetishly on thick brown hair; such as a white chin snuggled into a fur boa, one end of which was thrown loosely over a shapely shoulder; such as soft, melancholy eyes. But when those eyes were flush with winking drops——

He stopped on a quick impulse, and looked the girl squarely in the face.

"Are you crying for me?" he said.

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The wet eyes fell before him. Their owner scraped with the toe of her shoe on the pavement.

"Are you?" he repeated, but this time in a whisper.

"Yes."

He laughed softly. Perhaps the tragic wreck of things was not, after all, complete.

"O, do come on, *please!*" she said, suddenly and rebelliously. "People will be wondering."

They were standing by a quiet by-street. He touched her hand very gently to motion her down it.

"Miss Urchin," he said presently, as they strolled on together, "I want to know only one thing—do you believe in my innocence?"

"I have never doubted it for a moment," she answered low.

"Thank you," he said simply.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Here's Clara Lovejoy coming."

A tall young lady, somewhat over-dressed, and with bold, insolent eyes, swept upon them, stared, and passed without a salutation.

"You see?" said the young man. "She used to know me. That is what your father has done."

"Clara," said Miss Urchin, in a distinct, rather loud voice, "once forged *her* father's name to a cheque. It was hushed up; but everybody knew about it."

Mandrake shrunk a little.

"I don't like to hear you say such things," he said.

"Why not—it's true."

"It may be; but it seems to clash, somehow, with the other—with your generous belief in me."

"I *do* believe in you," she said—"now more than ever."

He didn't ask her why. The assurance in itself was enough.

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"Mr. Mandrake," she said, "I hope you won't let this—this horrible mistake interfere with your career?"

"I have been robbed of my character," he answered. "I must do without one, that's all. I daresay, when all's said, it stands in the way of one's worldly prospects."

"That isn't like you, I'm sure. Who is your friend—the man I saw you with? Something about him seemed familiar to me."

"I hope not."

"Why? Isn't he nice?"

"Not in your sense, I daresay."

"That is what I feared. O, don't let him persuade you to give up your profession!"

"He won't persuade me to anything against my will."

"Yes, but——"

"Miss Urchin, that man held out a hand to me when I was homeless and desperate. He was a prisoner like myself, discharged on remand, and we are comrades henceforth."

"I have no right to advise or entreat you," she said. "Were you on your way to visit papa?"

"Yes. *I* was."

"To ask him——"

"To ask him, Why did he do it?"

She put a little nervous hand on his arm, pleading to him, detaining him.

"I fancied I had guessed. But it seems incredible."

"Tell me, please."

"It was from something he let fall—the morning, two mornings, after. I had come upon the case in the paper, and I could hardly believe my eyes. I knew that there had been some sort of a bet between you."

"You knew it?"

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"Yes; but not what it was—only that it seemed to explain your act."

"It was the sole explanation of it."

"So I was sure. And then he wanted to have you searched, didn't he?"

"Yes; and I refused."

"That was it—at least if I'm not mistaken."

"But I don't see——"

"You will, when I can speak. It's so difficult—so humiliating. Papa, you must know, takes the wildest fancies into his head sometimes. That, and his jealousy about me, is, or it may be, the explanation."

"His jealousy? about you?"

"It's too absurd, I know. He values me at nothing less than a duchess. I can't help it; or his mad suspicions."

"Suspicions?"

"Yes, that you and I were—were secretly corresponding together."

Mandrake uttered a funny little sound—almost like a soft oath. He stumbled, and recovered himself.

"Corresponding! you and I!" he whispered. "Well, even if we had been, would that have amounted to such a monstrous crime—one to merit such treatment?"

"I'm giving papa's point of view," answered the girl, hanging her head.

"I see. And what——?" he paused, amazed. "Miss Urchin, do you mean to suggest, really, that he did this thing, committed this horrible treachery, on the off-chance of discovering some incriminating evidence on me?".

"Indeed, I can think of no other explanation," she said, and dissolved into irrepressible tears.

He was immensely shocked and moved.

"Pray, pray don't let it distress you so," he said—"at

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least, not on my account. The insult was to you. To think that, on our very slight acquaintance, you could have been guilty of allowing such a liberty!"

"Of course, I shouldn't have dreamt of it. But then you might have taken it without my meaning you should."

"I don't understand you. In that case, naturally, you would have complained at once to your father."

"Yes, so I should. How silly of me! Besides, why should you want to? O, what a miserable position this has put us all into!"

"There's only one thing to be done," said Mandrake resolutely. "I must go at once to Mr. Urchin, and contradict this monstrous slander."

"O! must you?" said the girl, raising wet, entreating eyes. "He never actually uttered it, you know."

"It is your solution of the riddle, anyhow. I must not be denied the least chance to clear myself, if only——"

"Yes?"

"To justify your belief in me."

"Very well, Mr. Mandrake. Will you come, please?"

"I had better see him alone."

"O, no! It is a case for two witnesses, I think."

They had wandered to near her home. A few steps brought them to it. She opened the door with a latch-key, and ushered him silently into the dining-room. The Professor was seated there. He looked round, started to his feet, instinctively thrust into his breast-pocket a little green note-book he had been consulting, and uttered a violent exclamation.

"Sir," said young Mandrake, "I have come to tell you that your suspicion of my having entered into a clandestine correspondence with Miss Urchin is utterly monstrous and unfounded."

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CHAPTER X

THE Professor, both constitutionally and by training, was generally to be counted on for an absolute self-possession in emergencies. You could seldom catch him nodding, or surprise any admission out of him through a show of urgency. It was his principle, or system, to appropriate, when suddenly accosted, a minute's silence to the clear arrangement of his thoughts. In the meantime his spectacles, motionlessly canvassing the visitor, would reduce that body to a condition for reasonable discussion.

He may have foreseen the certainty of this young man's early descent on him. It was a necessary corollary, perhaps, of an extremely discomfiting business. Even now he did not know what to make of that business, though his views, as regarded his victim's guilt, had perforce suffered a shock. He had early ascertained from Johnson that the search at the prison had revealed absolutely nothing beyond the ordinary male equipment—handkerchief, pipe, pouch, a bunch of keys, a trifle of loose money—of paper not so much as a scrap. Therein seemed clear, if negative, evidence of the prisoner's innocence; and yet he was not so satisfied but that he could, with a stiff conscience, recommend to his Company the non-pressing of the charge on grounds no more generous than that there was just the question of a doubt to which the accused was entitled. He could not persuade the bitterness in

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his own mind to any fuller concession. It reconciled him to the utterly inadmissible casuistry that a false charge might be used to cover a real one. It was only when his directors, nettled by the magistrate's remarks, called him pretty sharply to account for the ambiguity of his attitude towards the case, insisting that he had had no business to lodge the complaint unless he were clear as to the young man's bad intentions, that his conscience seemed at all to wake to any realisation of an enormity committed. But even then, so deep-seated was his suspicion of the boy, his main regret was, not that he had brought a false accusation against him, but that, in acting thus precipitately, he had tied his own hands from justifying their deed in an exposure of the prisoner's actual motive. His fury had, in short, betrayed him to that argument of force which was always so much less fruitful than diplomacy. He had only to plead to himself, against this abuse of his own principles, that the occasion had been exceptional.

But now, with the outcry of this sudden vision in his ears, his whole case seemed to break up and clash to the ground. The inference, if genuine, which it appeared to draw, deprived him at a blow of what he had chosen to assume for a sufficient justification in itself of his treachery. Was it really to be taken that this boy could find in his own mind no other explanation than this for the deed which had ruined his life? He wondered still, against his conviction of the essential truth of the defence. He let some moments pass, while he pondered the problem.

"Do you take this means, young gentleman," he said, harshly, at length, "of convincing me of my mistake?"

"I was coming to see you, sir," replied Mandrake, "when I encountered your daughter. She will assure

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you, if you desire it, that the meeting was accidental. I had had no thought but to demand an explanation of your atrocious behaviour to me. Miss Urchin, to my astonishment, supplied one—one so incredible, and so shameful to you, that, for her sake, I could have wished you incapable of it."

"My daughter, young gentleman," said the Professor, "will no doubt appreciate the full force of your compliment to her, at my expense."

"In my opinion, sir," retorted the young man, "you cannot pay too dearly for such a monstrous assumption. But, even if you had reason for it, would that justify you in such an act of treachery?"

Pauline, sunk into a chair apart, buried her face in her hands. The Professor conned his accuser wintrily.

"Mr. Mandrake," he said, "if your own conscience doesn't denounce you——"

The other interrupted him fiercely—

"It is as clean as yours is foul. It blames me in nothing but in having condescended to the acquaintance of a man who my right instincts should have told me was abusing his years and dignity in associating with young libertines who made a sport of both?"

Pauline looked up, with drowned eyes.

"There, papa," she sobbed. "Didn't I advise you against the smoking-concert?"

"Hold your tongue!" shouted the Professor, in a sudden burst of fury. Then he recollected himself, and readdressed his accuser satirically, but with a rather trembling lip—

"You turn a phrase quite eloquently, sir. But didn't you invite me?"

"No, you invited yourself."

"Well," said the Professor, "you must allow my years and dignity the privilege of their qualities."

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"Not when you employ them to such vile uses."

"I had my suspicions, I tell you."

"No suspicions warranted such a betrayal of trust."

"If you had consented to turn out your pockets at the time——

"Why should I turn out my pockets?"

"It was a mistake not to. Blame your own obstinacy."

"The point was our bet, and you knew it."

"The matter need have gone no further. I—I am a father."

"You have no right to be. If I have respected your claim as such hitherto I repudiate it from this moment."

The Professor positively gasped. He turned to his daughter.

"Are you a party to this—this renunciation of me, Pauline?"

She rose to her feet, plucking at her handkerchief.

"I don't see why I come into the question, papa. You cannot help harping, you see, on that insane suspicion. Mr. Mandrake and I are—are nothing to one another—nothing, at least, but parties in this defence. I don't suppose we have spoken together half-a-dozen times."

"It is perfectly true," said the boy. "But it is just as true that I owe Miss Urchin my deep gratitude for volunteering her belief in my innocence; and, if she will allow me, at any future time, to express my obligation to her, I shall not feel called upon to ask your permission first."

He looked very strong and noble as he faced his enemy with this declaration. Calamity had loosened his tongue and given his parts of speech a new ora-

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torical dignity. The Director of the Department of Antiquities shrunk quite abashed before him.

"I came to demand an explanation," continued the youngster, "and I am to assume that this is the one vouchsafed me. It accounts little, I think, for my disgrace, my ruined career—an omission so inhuman that I can hardly bring myself to believe in its genuineness. I think there must be something left out. I can assure you that I shall not rest in my efforts to penetrate to the truth, and to bring you to a reckoning for it, when discovered."

He was like a grenadier for stiffness. He walked, still unbending, to the girl.

"Miss Urchin," he said, "I must ask your forgiveness for saying these things before you. They had to be said, and you would come, you know. I shall never forget your belief in me, or forget to take it into account when the occasion arises to remember it. I have never written to you in my life before. May I sometimes write to you now?"

The Professor found his voice.

"No!" he roared.

"Yes, if you like," whispered Pauline.

The young man bowed, and left the room and house.

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CHAPTER XI

MR. MANDRAKE was in a very exalted state as he descended the steps into the Square. His bosom thrilled with a consciousness of great achievements. It was not only that the interview had left in him a sense of supreme moral victory; a triumph infinitely more poignant characterised it. He had thought himself betrayed and disillusioned where disillusionment was above all things bitter. An instant's wrung emotion had convinced him of his mistake. The Syren he had mis-pictured decoying unsuspecting youth into her snares was revealed, restored to him, the incorruptible sweet femininity of his earlier fancy. Wet eyes, a faltering admission, had given him back his faith in woman. Now his own eyes, like returned exiles, could see the things of old even lovelier than memory had painted them to him. Men could be traitors; women, never. That fragrant breath had made of his inglorious wounds most honourable scars. What did all the rest matter, so long as she was loyal to him? Pauline, believed a traitress, had killed his hope in a heaven. Pauline re-enshrined was Paradise regained. It was only in the perversity of things that she was her father's daughter.

And yet that had to be borne in mind. He, Roger, was in the position of dividing a house against itself. All things considered, where lay his honourable course? He could imagine an ideal one. Supposing it granted

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that the Professor owed him reparation—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; and that, pending that settlement, he himself were to claim a hostage? There were instances on record of hostages electing to remain in the hands of their gaolers—of even becoming to them as hostages to Fortune—wives, that is to say. Would not that constitute a lovely solution of the problem—an exoneration of him by default? It could not be held in the nature of things that a fond father should entrust the happiness of his only child to one of whose criminal viciousness he was assured. The very gift would imply his admission of, and atonement for, a wrong unwittingly committed. And it would ensure, at the same time, the giver from an otherwise just retribution. Who could be a Judas to those sweet lips?

And at that moment, walking in a luminous abstraction, the bang of a pedestrian's shoulder against his own brought him to his senses. He staggered and apologised; but the jar had served to scatter all his pretty dreams like so much tinsel-dust.

He moved on again, but very wide awake now. Pauline for him, the penniless outcast, the morally convicted blackguard! What had ever passed between them, even when he could boast prospects and a character, to warrant such a mad presumption? She was the destined bride of substance and a high position. Her advocacy had been the mere generous impulse of an honest mind, desirous of acquitting the one nearest and dearest to her from a charge of deliberate injustice. He himself was a figure no more than supplementary to that purpose—involved in it, but necessary only to its realisation. Having once vindicated, she would have done with him. He could wish, in that case, the process long. While it lasted it sanctified his

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disgrace to him. Better to remain an outcast than regain his old self on such terms.

His old self! Had that self been in love, then? The question smote him with a sudden wonder. He had certainly admired the girl, rather at a distance—her sparkle, her vivacity; even, with some reservation, her cleverness. But he had always been a little conscious of some tempering criticism in his approval. She had an over-quick wit for people's defects; and one could never quite be sure with such natures that their seductive confidences were not designed as lures to one's personal weaknesses, not for purposes of sympathy, but of caricature. The penetrative faculty rides recklessly on an uncurbed tongue. The two in combination are often amusing, but seldom reassuring. Miss Urchin could be both observant and expressive.

He had recognised that flaw in her plainly enough; had taken it well into account in his estimate of the young beauty's character, and nevertheless, to sum up, that estimate had been something more than favourable. He had found an attractiveness about the girl which was none the less alluring because it defied analysis.

That, perhaps, though it may not have occurred to the young gentleman, is the very quality of attractiveness. Perfectly good people offer no surprises—never falsify one's expectations of them. An engaging self-contradictoriness is one of the charms of imperfection. We may even quote biblical authority in proof of that assertion. Is there not more joy in heaven over one sinner doing penance than over the impeccability of ninety and nine just men?

Still, though he had felt the lure, though he had even answered to it with a certain sense of fascination,

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he had never been conscious of his thraldom to any deeper sentiment than admiration. What, then, had wrought the sudden change—this instant assumption of a right to consider himself, and be considered, as one involved, in any way, in the young lady's matrimonial destinies? What but the as sudden realisation that she was lost to him for ever?

Love is to be counted amongst those angel visitors whose identity often does not occur to us until they are gone. In sporting with a fancy, this boy had not recognised how indispensable to himself he had been making that fancy until—lo! all in a moment it had taken wing, and his eyes were opened, and he saw himself alone.

He looked about him with a sense as of one actually robbed and forsaken. He was conscious of a feeling in himself of that sort of pathetic self-pity which he had experienced as a child in the first days of any new term at school. To want one's love or one's mummy, wasn't it very much the same thing? He seemed to have lost his heaven in the selfsame moment of his discovering it. Pauline the unattainable was filling at last the whole field of his passionate desires.

He set his teeth and strode on. Life, he felt, was impossible, since life with Pauline was impossible. A thought struck him then—one so wild and thrilling that it seemed to take his breath away. Was not pity said to be akin to love? What if *she* were in love with *him*? Tears, certain tell-tale glancings, ambiguous words recurred to him. No, he would not cosset such a mad presumption. Still, his lip had stiffened and his eyes kindled as he stopped, on a sudden thought, and looked about him.

What had become of Festus le Touzel? The little

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man's existence had slipped completely out of his mind. He ought to have been somewhere about, expecting him. He hunted round a bit, beating up streets and by-streets, until at length, seeing no sign of the figure he sought, he concluded that the journalist had grown tired of waiting, and had gone back to Gray's Inn. Thither, therefore, he bent his own steps.

He reached the old quadrangle off Holborn at last, very tired and spent, and ascended the long flights of stairs wearily. He was conscious of already regarding the place as "home"—his one ark of refuge from these seething floods of traffic. Opening the door of the attic, he saw the figure of his new comrade, returned there before him as he had expected.

Mr. le Touzel was seated cross-legged on a box, using his recent purchase deskwise on his knees, and scribbling furiously away on a sheet of paper placed on its crown. His expression was preoccupied and saturnine; but he left off a moment to nod a greeting to the newcomer.

"Hope you'll excuse me, my boy," he said. "You were long, and I'd an idea that wanted putting into shape. Leave me to do it, now, and lie down on the bed like a good son while I finish."

Roger acquiesced. He was glad, anyhow, of the repose. He lay, and watched the busy pencil fly, and was content to feel the comfort in his limbs and ask no questions. It was growing dusk when the little man tossed aside the final page of his article, and rose to his feet with a stretch and yawn.

"Money's our first consideration," said he, "and there's ten pounds of it accounted for. Now I'll just go out and realise on the stuff, and invest a judicious modicum of it in prog. Hillo?"

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He bent and peered curiously into the face of his new house-mate.

"Aren't you after correcting the sum of your debts to humankind?" said he—"at least as regards its women part?"

Mandrake laughed in a tired way.

"You've the gift, Festus," he said.

"True for you," answered the other, "if it's thought-reading you mean. You're in love."

"Am I? Well, I suppose I am."

"She's a real beauty, Roger. I'll grant you that."

"Who?"

"Pooh, pooh!"

"She's not for me, nevertheless. What have you been writing about?"

"Just an old commission—a series on the Labouring Classes. What are the labouring classes, any way? Not those that dig and chop and carry water. Ninety per cent. of 'em would never do a day's work in their lives if it wasn't for the mighty attraction of beer. It's the people who use their brains that are the real labouring classes. It's the navvy who's the wit and the wish to rise above his fellows that leaves the idle for the labouring classes. Remember that when it comes to giving your vote for putting up the guillotine in Palace Yard."

"All right. What I want to know is how I'm to emulate that navvy?"

"Anan?"

"I'm without means of prospects, Festus."

"We'll think over that in good time."

"And in the meanwhile I'm your pensioner."

"No; I'm yours."

"O! don't talk nonsense."

"I'm meaning it, Roger. In a good hour be it

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spoken. Now, what has come of your interview? Did you see the old rascal?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I believe I've discovered his motive."

"You have? Well, I've my own theories as to that, too."

"What theories?"

"Never you mind at present. What are yours?"

"Why—you'll hardly credit it, I can't myself. Festus, he—he suspected I was secretly corresponding with his daughter."

"And weren't you?"

"Look here, my friend——"

"Now, don't fly out. You weren't, of course."

"If you knew her! It was just a dodge to make me turn out my pockets."

Mr. le Touzel stared a moment, then bent in a paroxysm of silent laughter.

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CHAPTER XII

"ROGER, my son, you're about to encounter me in a new part—that of the silent, austere, impenetrable Machiavel. I'm going to have my hair cut and my beard taken off."

"What's up, Festus?"

"I'm in one of my serious moods, that's all. I'm on the track of a mighty purpose. All you've got to do is to follow suit as I lead, and question nothing and wonder at nothing. Now stop while I go and dress for the part."

He was gone an hour, and returned, a wilderness reclaimed. His red head was as sleek as a curate's; his cheeks and jaw—which latter revealed itself underhung like a bull-terrier's—were roseate smooth. Roger would not have known him for a moment by his appearance alone. Blue spectacles and the base "topper" completed a picture which stood for a positive caricature of Mr. le Touzel.

"Well!" said his friend in astonishment. "What's all this for? Have you got a secret commission from Scotland Yard?"

"Never you mind. I've my reasons. It's convenient sometimes to bury one's identity."

"But why not at least get a more respectable hat, now you've the means?"

"What! part with my fetish, my mascot, my thaumaturgic electro-biologic thinking-cap! I tell

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you what, my boy—this was a lucky purchase. It's saturated with the emanations from some Theban brain. I *see* things when I put it on."

"O! all right," said the boy; "so long as you don't feel them."

"Don't be coarse, Roger," answered the little man. "Now, do I look my part of somebody else?"

"Why don't you want to be yourself, Festus? You couldn't better that part, in my opinion."

"That's very handsomely put, my boy. But you're forgetting what myself's been associated with of late. There's some—bad cess to them!—might be after recalling that trifle to my discredit; and it's the clean credit now I may be wanting."

"What sort of credit?"

"Why, credit for a book, to be sure."

"A book? How much?"

"Why, this one may be asked a matter of thirty-five pound."

"O! I understand. You mean——"

"Now, didn't I tell you to listen and hold your tongue? Are you ready to start?"

"Quite."

"Then we'll just make, in the first instance, for that mighty Pantheon of Vanities, the British Museum."

"What, its reading-room?"

"Exactly."

"You'll want a ticket."

"Then I'll want what I've got; and by the same token I hope I shall get what I want. Come along, now."

They walked to the Museum—it was but a short distance—and Roger, by the way, was the more talkative of the two. His brain felt still in a sort of chaotic fever—it seemed to prickle with tingling sparks—now

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of hope, now despair, now of resignation, now of mutiny. His eyes dared the world about him; yet at the same time he dreaded meeting any of his former associates.

Suddenly he gripped his companion's arm.

"Here he comes," he whispered.

"Comes? Who?" said the other, startled.

"My enemy—the Professor."

The ungainly figure approached, deeply frowning and preoccupied, and passed without recognition. Mr. le Touzel pursued it curiously with his eyes.

"I shall know him again," he said, turning to resume their way; and he started sniggering. His nose and lip wrinkled up like a cat's. "Wanted you to turn out your pockets, did he?" he chuckled, small and hoarse.

"It seems to tickle you, Festus," said the boy.

"It tickles me cruel, Roger."

"You haven't told me yet what *your* theory is."

"Leave that be. It exonerates you, any way."

"How do you mean? Do you too believe me innocent—wholly and entirely?"

"I don't believe anything about it, my boy. I'm as sure of it as yourself."

"But can you convince the world for me?"

"Some day, perhaps."

The young man sighed.

"And in the meantime I've lost my character. There's nothing for me but to turn Socialist."

Festus laughed out. "Unconscious satirist!" said he. "Go and tell that to the red-neckties." Then he enunciated: "Socialism's nothing but a sentiment. In the question of a living, which is the only practical one, every man gets what he deserves. You may fancy an autocracy, or a democracy, or a bureaucracy,

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or a plutocracy, or what's called a constitutional government—for all the personal equation's concerned there's not a hair to split between them. Everywhere the clever man comes to the top. What you call him's only a question of terms. He may be a Rockefeller, or a Bernard Shaw, or just an ordinary monarch. I don't myself see anything gained by discounting kings. They are the logical deities of our system. Now, we're both deserving men, and so we're going to end in a fortune."

And, with that, they reached the Museum, and passed through its enormous portals into that prehistoric atmosphere which levels all distinctions.

Festus drew his companion straight across the booming vestibule to those lesser swing-doors which shut away the domed temple of erudition beyond.

"Wait for me here," said he; "I'll not keep you longer than a Museum wink, which counts at something less than Rip Van Winkle's."

He vanished, and Roger set himself to await his reappearance with what patience he could muster. An hour, two hours had passed, however, before his friend returned.

He came out, bustling and excited, accompanied by an official.

"His name's in the catalogue," he said, "but devil a mention of what we want. I'm going to see the Keeper of the Printed Books. Come on."

He hurried away with his guide, and Roger followed on their heels. The man led them on, by an intricacy of grave and sonorous chambers, where massive showcases displayed in profusion treasures of gilt and illuminated manuscripts, each worth a small kingdom's purchase, and the walls were panelled with priceless volumes, to a remote, low corridor lined throughout

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its length with books, wherein, at what seemed an indefinite point in the array, he suddenly halted them and touched an obscure handle in the wall. Instantly what proved to be a door, decorated deceptively with dummy literature, swung noiselessly open, and revealed a comfortable office within. Roger was so astounded by this exhibition of playful artifice in a temple of such solemnity, that he delayed to return the official salutation of a gentleman who came forward to greet them; and, when he was about to correct himself, wonder again held him rigid. The Keeper of the Printed Books was the Director of the United Service Store's Antiquities Department's own double.

The very man—nose, spectacles, loose collar, slovenly dress all duplicated. Yet there was no doubt about the practical distinction. Sir Richmond Beryl was a very important person indeed, and his salary in his place more than doubled the other's in his. The attendant made a formal statement and withdrew. Le Touzel, prompt and journalistic, came to his point at once—though with a stare in his eyes, too, for it was evident that he also was struck by the resemblance.

"I'm after a book, Sir Richmond. It's not in your catalogues. I'm thinking you might tell me why."

"What is it, what is it?"

The Keeper was galvanic and impatient. People bothered him a good deal, and he had his own pre-occupations. He was himself a poet of parts, though not, perhaps, of the prime parts, and his mind happened at the moment to be wrestling with a knotty stanza in a "Dirge of Stillborn Books," which was the classical pleasantry latest to his inspiration.

"It's Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers,' said Festus.

The Keeper, his left hand holding up his right by the

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wrist, was biting the back of the latter between restlessness and abstraction; but at the sound of the title he suddenly paused and looked at the journalist, as a cat stops licking itself when a coal falls into the fender.

"Eh! What about it?" he said sharply. "Have you got a copy you want to sell?"

"Faith, Sir Richmond, I wish I had," said the other. "It's no more than a squint of it I want, and you'd be welcome to the reversion for me. But it was the Museum I'd hoped might be supplying me with that opportunity."

"We've no copy here. Weren't you told so?"

"Yes; but——"

"You haven't got one you wish to sell, then?"

"No, but——"

"Good morning to you."

He opened the bookish door, motioned his visitors hurriedly out, and shut it upon them promptly. Festus, scratching his chin, his jaw all askew, conned his companion humorously.

"This chase is going to be more exciting than I anticipated, Roger," he said. "No copy here! Where, then, my boy?"

"Surely, Festus, this doesn't exhaust all possibilities?"

"Certainly not; but it writes off a whole sheaf of 'em. If they haven't any particular book here, there's one chief reason for the lack, and that is that same book's an exceptional rarity."

"Well, we know, anyhow, where one copy is to be found."

"So we do, my boy; but the question is to get a squint of it."

"Where's the difficulty—for you, I mean?"

"Where, indeed! It ought to seem simple enough,

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oughtn't it? Roger, my son, what will you lay me that the Stores has got that book still?"

"Nothing, of course. But anyhow there's no harm in your trying."

"Not a bit of harm, and—not a bit of good; that's to say, if I see what I think I see."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean just this, Roger, that your Professor, if he's the man I take him to be, will have appropriated that unique copy to himself, though, to do so, he'll have been forced to buy it in at the figure of his own valuation."

"Why, in Heaven's name?"

"Why, just to prevent any one else from getting it, that's all."

"But I don't understand. What can make the thing itself so indispensable to him?"

"Just what I tell you."

"If there's anything in it mysteriously necessary to him, he could copy out the passage, or get it by heart."

"And by the same token part with his secret."

"Well, it's all Greek to me."

"So it must be, of course; and so I might find it. Only it just happens I've got the key."

"To what?"

"Never you mind, yet awhile. I want that book; let that satisfy you; and by hook or by crook, by purchase or luck or theft, I must have that book—or at least a squint of it. Now come on to the dealers."

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CHAPTER XIII

"DEAR MR. MANDRAKE—I am *so* sorry to have to say it, but I think this little correspondence between us ought to cease now. *Nothing* you can write will convince me more than I am convinced already that you are *entirely* innocent of the horrible charge brought against you, and I think that *even papa* at last is beginning to suspect that he may have made *a serious mistake.* I wish I could explain to you what has brought me to this conclusion, but it is so difficult in a letter. Anyhow, his behaviour to me has become suddenly so much more reasonable and considerate, that I feel I should be doing a *great wrong* to persist in flying in the face of his *expressed* desires. So will you *please* not write to me again. I shall believe in you none the less, *be assured.* Only I owe him the first duty. I hope you won't mind.

"Your sincere friend,

"PAULINE URCHIN.

"PS.—Sometimes when I walk on Wormwood Scrubbs, which I frequently do during the hour before lunch, the sight of the prison makes me feel quite ill. It seems so impossible to atone to you for all that unmerited suffering."

Roger, with a moody dismay in his eyes, handed this letter across to Festus.

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"So much for my concession to the sex!" he groaned. "Henceforth I am a Timon."

"What the plague!" cried the little man, looking up from the letter in astonishment. "What's ailing you now, you omadhaun?"

"Can't you see?"

"I see a very pretty invitation to a constitutional, that's all."

"How do you mean?"

Festus handed back the document, in a contempt too deep for expression. "There," said he; "go and catch a Bayswater 'bus. You can be on the Scrubbs by mid-day."

Very few people would select Wormwood Scrubbs for an ideal lovers' pleasaunce, unless on the Epicurean principle that the billing and cooing of free birds may borrow an additional zest from the contiguity of their caged fellows. The place is aptly named—symbolised for all gall and wormwood and sterility, in the lowering gaol which dominates it, and in its own mangy sward which is scrubbiness manifest. It is, in fact, one of London's lesser "open spaces," where the drabbier order of nursemaid greatly congregates, and the small, low youth of North Kensington and Notting Hill pitches its degraded stumps on grass which is like a thrice-turned carpet gaping with dusty holes. The Scrubbs, however, happens, for the conveniences of hard-set sentiment, to lie within handy distance of St. Peter's Square.

Pauline, truth to confess, loathed the Scrubbs. Even the *totally unexpected* appearance thereon one morning of a young gentleman in whom she was interested could make it no more than conditionally endurable to her. Indeed, their greetings were no

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sooner passed than she proposed turning their steps elsewhere.

"I can't bear the horrid place," she said.

"Really?" answered our ingenuous Roger. "Then what makes you come to it so often?"

"I don't," she said.

He pondered that reply; then suddenly was inspired.

"How am I to know where to meet you, then?" he asked.

She turned large astonished eyes on him.

"To meet me!" she exclaimed. "But you are not to meet me at all, Mr. Mandrake."

He was quite taken aback. His cheek flushed with shame, and he faltered as he replied—

"You—you hadn't meant, then—I—I had thought, perhaps, your mention of this place—of your walking here—wasn't quite inadvertent."

"O!" she protested. "What *could* have given you such an idea?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," he answered, much depressed.

"I was never so surprised in my life as when you spoke to me," said Miss Pauline—"or more cheered out of a dull mood," she added, with an atoning smile, for she did not like to see him so painfully disheartened.

"Were you really?" he said, brightening.

"O!" she answered. "I get sick to death of my own company sometimes."

He heaved a tremendous sigh. She so believed it to be the harbinger of a fond but obvious retort, that she hastened to interpose an inquiry.

"I daresay, now that I come to think of it, that my last letter did sound like an invitation. To be sure I

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mentioned a difficulty in explaining a certain thing in writing. Very rash of me. However, since it has brought you here, I suppose you would like to be told my reasons."

"If you don't mind."

"Well, my surmise may be true or false, of course. It is only that papa suddenly exclaimed one morning after breakfast, when he was preparing to go to the office, 'Good Lord, Pussy!' (that is his name for me, you know)—'something has recurred to me. What have you done with my old hat?' and seemed much put out when I told him that I had exchanged it at the door for a pot of polyanthus."

She paused. "His old hat!" exclaimed the young man, profoundly bemused.

"Yes," she said. "I can't tell what was the association of ideas in his mind, of course; but certainly that remark seemed somehow to date the beginning of a change in him. He has even taken to mentioning you since, now and then."

"He has?"

"Occasionally; and with an air, it seems to me, of apology—almost of deprecation."

Her eyes were suddenly bright and hot.

"He has always been an own dear daddy to me," she said, a little indistinctly—"and—and that made matters different. You will understand, won't you?"

"God forbid my setting you against your father," answered the boy, "if only *you* will continue to believe in me."

"Why not? Isn't that an additional reason for my doing so? I hope you, for your part, are going to prove my faith in you; though that, of course, is of no real consequence."

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"It is everything," he said fervently. "*How* am I to prove it?"

"By rising superior to this dreadful thing—making a name and a reputation for yourself in spite of it."

"I will try—if only you would continue to encourage me."

"A man like you should be above wanting a girl's help to do his duty."

"I don't say I want your help."

"What, then?"

"Miss Urchin—you—you have given me so much of your confidence, your generosity, your pity. Those must represent a great part of you."

"I don't know, I'm sure; but what if they do?"

"There can only be a little left, then. Won't you make your gift perfect, by letting me have that little too?"

A tense silence fell between them as they walked on together. A scavenger, of a philosophic turn, rested on his broom, regarding the two.

"Mr. Mandrake," said Miss Urchin at length, in a low voice of astonishment, "are you really implying that my letter was an invitation to you?"

"No," he said earnestly. "O, no!—only that your mere presence is an invitation to any man to speak the love he can't contain."

"Love!"—she gave back the word like a surprised echo. "Are you asking for my love?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "I can't help myself."

"*Well!*" she exclaimed in a shocked voice.

"Yes," he replied. "I know. Give me what I deserve, and send me away."

He suffered greatly, waiting for his dismissal. Presently, with her head down, she spoke.

"If it's such a little thing——"

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"I didn't mean that, you *know*," he interrupted in anguish.

"It would be mean, I suppose," she continued, "to refuse it you."

He ejaculated something, and tripped over his stick.

"Pauline!" he whispered, half choking, as he recovered himself.

"Hush!" she said—"for goodness' sake! That man's watching us. If you think for a moment, Mr. Mandrake——"

"Call me Roger."

"No, I shan't—not just yet—that I had foreseen what my careless admission would bring upon me——"

"You would have come just the same—say it!"

"Certainly not. I—I should have mentioned some more romantic spot than the Scrubbs."

"O, Pauline!"

"O, Roger!—O! I beg your pardon! What a surprise you are! I have never been so taken by storm—no, I don't mean that."

"Are you pleased to be? Are you?"

"I think so. I won't be certain."

"Do be certain."

"I'll try. There's papa to remember. Do you know what he said to me, no later than yesterday?"

"What?"

"Why, that if you could only once satisfy him as to what induced you to select that particular book—the one, he meant, I suppose, that was the subject of your quarrel——"

"There was no quarrel whatever."

"He could almost bring himself to beg your pardon. Won't you tell *me*, Roger?"

"I can only tell you, you beautiful love, what I told him—that my choice was absolutely accidental."

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"Was it? As accidental as this, I wonder? What martyrs to impulse you men make of yourselves!"

"I would go to the stake for my faith here, anyhow," cried the young man in an ecstasy—and, indeed, that is the doom of quite a number of Love's neophytes.

Suddenly he held out his hands, stupidly staring at them.

"What am I doing—thinking of," he said, "to offer these to you? They have had the handcuffs on them, Miss Urchin!"

They were turning a street corner at the moment, a blind wall on either side and not a soul in view. The girl stooped and touched his wrists, one after the other, with her lips—a lovely little action.

"There," she said, looking up with a tremulous smile, "are *my* fetters to take their place."

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CHAPTER XIV

"ROGER, my boy," said Festus shrewdly, "you have been in luck."

"Have I? What makes you think so?"

"Pooh, pooh! Give me that face for an index."

"I am a villain, a fiend—I am in heaven!" cried the other with rapturous inconsequence. "Don't speak to me about it, Festus. Every word, every detail is my own sacred possession. What have you been doing?"

"Courting on my own account," answered le Touzel, "and a more difficult mistress by the token than yours, my son. Give me a rare first edition for the true coyness. Your sort of scoundrelism can't hold a candle to Captain Antrobus's for reserve."

"O, that!" said the young man indifferently.

"Yes, that," answered the other. "It don't appeal to us in our present state of exaltation, does it? But mayhap we'll think differently when it comes to supplying us with the means to realise on our little idyll."

"I beg your pardon, Festus—though I don't for the life of me see how it's going to."

"Why should you, now? Or why should I, for the matter of that? I've bought a philosopher's thinking-cap, that's all. Would you like to know where it directed me?"

"Of course I should."

"Well, to Mr. Witherspoon's big bookshop in the

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Strand. He's the prince of dealers—the practical sort. If a book's to be had he'll get it for you."

"Did he give you a hope of this?"

"Devil a crumb. I saw the man himself. 'Bring me a copy,' said he, 'and I'll lay you down thirty pounds for it on that desk.'"

"'They're asking five more for one at the United Service Stores,' answered I. 'Trade profit,' said he. 'Where they picked it up the gracious knows. There's not occurred an example of it in the salerooms for a good fifty years. It's a rare book.' I asked him why, and it seems the whole edition of the thing was suppressed and destroyed before it was well issued. That was in 1828. There was some gross offence in it to a certain high personage, and the thing had to be withdrawn. Only a copy or two got out, and they're in private collections. The Museum hasn't got one, Witherspoon hasn't got one; deuce a one is to be had, it seems, for love or money—only that at the Stores."

"And that you despair of?"

"We'll see. I'm going to pay 'em a visit, anyway. And in the meantime we may as well be raking over the stalls again."

"All right! Come on."

"What! You're eager, too, are you?"

"You forget what you promised me in case we were successful."

"So I did; and don't be thinking I didn't mean it, and don't be grinning now. If my reasoning's deductive, it's sound."

"Well, I've nothing else to do, and—O, Festus, my boy, show me some way—any way—to justify to myself my suit of an angel and I'll bless you on my knees."

"'Suit of an angel,' says he! Aren't we all justified

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in wanting to be that sort of a bridegroom? But you set me flaming, Roger. To get a look of that book is come to be just the absorbing passion of my life. Hark away, now!"

They parted company at the Holborn entrance to the Gardens, each going in his own direction. To split the chase was to double the chance. Roger, for his share, went nosing all up Oxford Street, turning into cover wherever the fusty aroma of old print and paper seemed to promise results. None followed, though he was scrupulous enough in his search. Some dealers knew of the book and its value; others had never heard of it. It was among the shelves of the latter that he pursued his most particular investigations, even turning over one by one the contents of the sixpenny and twopenny boxes. He did it all, true enough, with a sense of mockery, subscribing to no more than an incomprehensible caprice, just because caprice was Festus personified and he owed everything to Festus. For the rest, even were he to discover the book, he told himself, what could it possibly reveal to him more than an explanation of the Professor's act? That would certainly be satisfactory in its way, but he could see no other potential profit to himself in the circumstance. His heart, in truth, was not in the quest in the least; and how could it be, seeing who claimed it? In the glamour of that magnificent possession even the tremendous wrong he had suffered was forgotten. Nay, it was more—it was glorified, since without the wrong he had been without Pauline. In this wrong lay his sole title to her. Why, then, should he wish it away—at any rate until it had bound them indissolubly together? He was matriculating, it will be seen, in love's paradoxes. He did not much want to be bothered with business matters

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just now. Circumstances had made any preconceived ideas of independence and a "living" unpalatable to him. He had worked hard hitherto and deserved his enforced holiday. His mind loitered on sentiment and the halcyon glow of lovers' meetings. He pictured to himself delighted lingering hours by Pauline's side, always justified in their lovely idleness by that same plea of wrong. Let le Touzel build him as many castles in the air as he liked. For himself he was content to remain thrall to an ecstatic inaction.

Such being his present sentiments, he was astonished to find that practical Pauline by no means echoed them. He had looked to a daily meeting with her; she vetoed it at once.

"Anybody can be a lover," she said. "I want you to be a man. If I am worth winning, I am worth working for."

"You know I would die for you," he said reproachfully.

"Yes, Roger," she answered sweetly, "but where would be the use? The question is, Will you live for me?"

"I do."

"Well, to live you must make a living."

"Not borrow one, you mean," he said, flushing. "But I am only using my friend while I am looking about me."

"Yes, I know," she said, and stopped.

He understood what her silence implied, and was a little hurt by it.

"I wish you were not so prejudiced against him," he protested. "He may be a bit wild and scatter-brained, but he has been, and is being, as true a friend to me as ever man could wish."

Still she did not respond, but drew little patterns in

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the dust with the point of her sunshade. They were sitting in Kensington Gardens within a few yards of the roaring traffic of the Bayswater Road.

"*Do* believe in his real regard for me, Paulie," said the young man wheedlingly. She could find that mood in him very attractive, but the practical sense of her predominated. She was quite conscious of her lover's present inclination to rest and be petted on his bed of martyrdom, and she was resolute to combat that inclination.

"I am sure of it, dear," she said. "It is that very thing that makes me uneasy."

"Why, please?"

"Because it means your trusting to it for results which your own determination and spirit of independence should try to bring about. Do you really believe in your heart that any discovery of this mysterious book would make both your fortunes for you?"

"No, I don't."

"There, you see! And there is something more, though I haven't liked to mention it. But, Roger dear, I can't, for all my sympathy with you, quite overlook the fact that in making such a point of securing this book you are seeming to confirm papa's suspicions of you and, even worse than that in one way, by confiding in me in the matter you are forcing me to appear a traitor to him, since I can't be—I can't be one to you."

He sat some moments in frowning silence, then his brow cleared and he pressed the hand lying beside him with a little, quick movement.

"You are quite right, Paulie," he said low, "and my affecting to trust to the nonsense does seem to put us both in a false position. I have no more idea than you have, of course, what scent the little fellow is

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following, or imagines he is following, and in the meanwhile——"

"And in the meanwhile you would please me so much, dearest, by disregarding it altogether, and trying to qualify yourself—yes, really to qualify yourself—as a suitor. You—you don't intend, I am sure, to value me at just so much adequate compensation for the wrong inflicted on you. But that is really what it appears like while you are content to come and idle away your time love-making. Do look at that girl! It's Mabel Denison. She's said to have the smallest waist and the largest appetite in London, and what she suffers to bring the two to terms would frighten a wasp."

"Yes," said Roger, "I say you are quite right, Paulie. One of the uses of love is the privilege it may claim of plain speaking, and by the same token, as my friend Mr. le Touzel would say, I should like you to break yourself of a little habit you've got of backbiting."

"Truth isn't backbiting, dear. But I'll try."

"That's right. I only mention a weakness of yours, as you've mentioned one of mine. Gossip to people about other people one doesn't know is so easy and so irrefutable. Now, just look at that benevolent old citizen going past outside the railings. I might invent some scandal about him to amuse you, and you'd never guess but that I had authority for it."

"Indeed, I shouldn't doubt it, dear. That's Mr. Levy. He goes about the country buying up cheap all sorts of worthless old portraits and selling them again to people who want ancestors. He's made an enormous fortune out of it."

"Now, isn't that slander again?"

"No, indeed it's not."

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"Well, never mind. The real point is, I suppose, that you want me for the future to 'dree my weird' alone."

"That's very unkind, Roger dear."

"Tell me what you really want, Paulie."

"If I were a crying girl I should cry, I think. I want our meetings not to be clandestine; I want not to be in antagonism either to you or papa; I want you to qualify yourself to come and claim me on practical grounds; I——"

She broke off quickly and rose to her feet, and he with her. Following the direction of her eyes, he was aware of a face—the Professor's—gazing upon them through the railings.

They stood spell-bound. Suddenly the old man waved his hand to them and passed on his way, going homewards. He looked a rather tired and broken figure. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose with a violence that thrilled their hearts.

"He never does that," whispered Pauline, "except when he is greatly moved."

She turned a pained, wet gaze on her lover.

"All right, Paulie," he said rather huskily. "We'll be open for the future. I'll come and fetch you next on Sunday, when he'll be at home."

"Thank you, Roger," she answered softly.

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CHAPTER XV

WHATEVER softer emotions the Director of Antiquities might permit himself were reserved for his ex-official hours. They gravitated, first and last, about the image of his daughter, who was really the old heathen's idol. He loved, admired, and altogether valued her at an incalculable figure. He could find many close interests, many subtle attractions in life, but this was an infatuation which absorbed all the others. All his schemes, all his mental voyagings had Pauline for their lode-star. Her happiness and welfare were so religiously the goal of his faith, that, to attain it, he was never incapable of over-riding scruples of conscience with other obstructions. Even a human immolation might hardly strike him as an extravagant sacrifice by the way.

There was a close association between this sentiment —though it may not at the moment appear—and that treacherous act of his which had spoiled a young and promising career—an act which, however seemingly provoked by circumstance, *should* have debased him beyond recovery, one would have thought, in his own eyes. I fear, however, that if the Professor felt any remorse at all for his deed, it was due in chief to the domestic recoil of that deed upon his own head. It had set up his idol in rebellion against him. There was the real tragedy of it to him.

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Now, to recover the old relations, he was willing in his unhappiness to concede the very point on which he had formerly founded his self-justification for the most unscrupulous measures. If Pauline would receive him back on no other terms he must even make a virtue of necessity and condone where he could not approve. He recognised that he had been fairly caught in the spring of his own setting. There had been no sort of an understanding between the couple (of that he *was* convinced at last) until he himself had supplied them with the clue to one.

It must be confessed that he did not love the victim of his mistake any the better for this his enforced concession to him. Indeed, he was rather inclined to regard his own tacit acceptance of a compulsory situation as an even extravagantly generous compensation for a doubtful wrong. For doubtful, for all that had been said and done, he would not but persist in his secret soul in regarding it. It was that choice of Antrobus's "Notable Swindlers" which stuck in his throat. It had chanced too opportunely to be accepted as accidental.

So, for the result of all, he submitted to the inevitable at home, while he kept his suspicions abroad. He let the situation of his own miscontriving go by default, while all the time young Mandrake never ceased to figure in his heart for the enemy who had baulked his plans in a direction which, he believed, had been on the point of showing him the great opportunity of his life.

In the meantime he himself held the book—had bought it in, indeed, at a ruinous figure—and by so much, through its uniqueness and the excessive improbability of a second copy coming into the market, could hope to stultify at least the unravelling

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by any other of a certain mystery to which it afforded an essential clue.

And then one morning at breakfast there had flashed into his mind, instant and confounding, an inkling of the possible solution of the riddle of that fatal day; and he had put down his knife and fork, like one suddenly sick, and addressed a quick inquiry to his daughter.

It turned, as already hinted, upon that antique and discarded "topper" which Pauline had exchanged at the door for a pot of flowers. The degraded article was suddenly connecting itself, in the Professor's half-awakened memory, with a precaution either effected or only designed—he could not recall which; but the mere suspicion was sufficiently disquieting. It came, however, too late: there was the incredible irony of the thing. His child, the object of his devotion, the subject of all his schemes and dreams, had herself made that woeful exchange, and the problem was destined to remain, by her act, it seemed, not only unanswered but unanswerable. She would not even undertake to identify the other party to the fateful transaction. All hawkers were to her like Sir Bedivere —"No more than a voice," gruff with bawling, that addressed her as "lady," and sought to ingratiate her by a constant repetition of the term.

She wondered over papa's particularity, but unsuspiciously, because the Professor had not ventured, of course, to give her the true reasons for it. At the same time she observed with astonishment its coincidence with an apparent change in his feelings towards young Mandrake. What dutiful moral she drew from that has already been shown.

In the meantime the Professor, for his part, was suffering a very purgatory of emotions. The thought

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that he himself, in a fit of mental abstraction, had possibly been the true culprit affected him really in less degree than that of the maddening way in which his own memory had succeeded—if it had succeeded—in making an April fool of him. To have had that fond familiar old "tile" hanging in the hall neglected and unconsulted during those many days, while Pauline's cast-iron purchase was corrugating his reluctant brow, and skipping impish to every whiff of wind; and then to have lost the former beyond recovery just as its potential value was about to be suggested to him—what more bitter irony of Fate could mortal endure? Hoping against hope, he made a few inquiries amongst such local costermongers as he encountered. They were fruitless, as might have been expected. The hat was vanished "like the baseless fabric of a vision." Yet, like a departed vision, it did not cease to occupy his waking thoughts. He got into a sort of morbid habit of monotonously tallying up the silk hats that went by him in the street. What were the odds against his ever encountering his own again among them? They might have been taken at a million pounds to a farthing, and nevertheless left him victor; for on a certain day the incredible thing actually did happen. The hat, adorning another brow, floated into his astonished ken.

Mr. Festus le Touzel, spectacled, professional, but intensely inquisitive under his learned aspect, was deeply interested in the Antiquities Department at the Stores, into which he wandered one day. Especially was he captivated by the books, not one of which but possessed some peculiar claim to the attention of the collector, and was attractive, if for no other reason, by reason of its price. He addressed an inquiry presently to one of the two or three sub-curators—quasi-

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gentlemanly men, something in suggestion like charity bazaar stewards, and each having a tiny rosette in his button-hole—who perambulated the department. The answer he received interested without surprising him. He had been prepared for it.

"Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers'! We had a copy, sir; but I believe it is sold. Will you kindly wait a moment while I inquire?"

Festus waited, shrewd and expectant. In a little the man returned to him.

"Will you step this way?" he said.

Festus followed him into a little private office, where a certain individual was standing by a table thickly littered with papers and packages. He recognised this person at a glance. He had had his attention drawn to him one morning in Holborn.

The Professor, his glasses staring and his under lip drooped, acknowledged the visitor's entrance with a scarce perceptible bow.

"You are inquiring, I understand, sir," he said, "about Antrobus's 'Swindlers'? The copy we possessed is sold."

"O!" said Festus. "I'm wondering, now, if you'd mind telling me to whom?"

"Certainly I should," answered the Professor. "What's your reason for wishing to know, may I ask?"

"The man might be open to an offer, that's all."

"In these matters," said the Professor, "we stand in a confidential position towards our members. You are one, by the way, I presume?"

"When I buy of you, sir," said Festus loftily, "will be time for you to be questioning my right to. In the meantime you can be questioning, if you like, your own in asking me."

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"Just as you please," answered the Professor. "My inquiry is quite in order. I am responsible for the safe custody of a number of valuable things. This is one of them. You are acquainted with its rarity, I suppose?"

"I am a collector, sir."

"You may write this off, I think, from the catalogue of your possible 'finds.' There is hardly another known copy."

"One or two, maybe. You'll not be after localising them, I presume?"

"No."

"So I supposed. Good morning to you."

He had removed his hat upon his entrance, and, while he talked, held it behind his back. Now, as he reached the door, he was replacing it upon his head in act to withdraw, when an ejaculation from the Professor halted him.

"What's the matter?" said he.

The Professor looked like a man suddenly startled and amazed.

"One—one moment," he stammered. "This—this book? You particularly want it?"

"*There's* a question, now, to a collector!"

"Your—your interest in it is purely what one may call antiquarian?"

"My dear sir, may I ask is it part of your co-operative system to demand a purchaser's motives? Is anything wrong with my hat, now, that you're staring at it like that?"

"Wrong? Nothing whatever. Why should there be? Excuse me—we—we naturally like to give a preference in these matters to the *bonâ-fide* collector. Supposing another copy *should* occur, now? You—you wouldn't care to leave your address?"

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"O! I'll look in again," said Festus airily; "or anyhow, my agents will let me know. Good morning." And he left the room.

The Professor stood a moment as if paralysed; then hurriedly followed the retreating footsteps. Going half-blindly, he ran against an approaching figure, staggered, recovered himself, and, recognising whom he had encountered, accosted him frenziedly.

"Johnson, did you observe the person who left me a moment ago?"

"I think I did, sir."

"Follow him at once, and find out where he lives."

The detective wheeled and disappeared, and the Professor returned in great agitation to his office.

"I must follow this up," he thought excitedly. "My hat—I could not be mistaken—the faithful familiar of years! Why, even the lining, when he revealed it—my own name, written inside on the crown—and the book—there *must* be a connection. I must visit him—find out—extract the truth somehow. Why did I let him go? Why didn't I invent some excuse for looking inside? Insufferable ass that I was!"

He clutched his brow in a frenzy. The ensuing hour or two found him half demented. He ran at Johnson, when the man returned, as if he were moved to claw the truth out of him.

"Well?" he gasped.

"It's all right, sir. I've traced him."

"What's his name?"

"Runciman."

"And his address?"

"Ninety-nine, Pembridge Gardens, Notting Hill Gate."

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CHAPTER XVI

ON Sunday afternoon Mr. Roger Mandrake knocked resolutely at the front door of the house in St. Peter's Square, and inquired of the maid of all work if Miss Urchin were at home. Miss Urchin herself, prettily shod and befurbelowed for a constitutional, came downstairs into the hall to answer the question in person, dismissed the girl, and, treating the visitor to a tremulous smile of understanding which thrilled his soul, opened the door of the dining-room and looked in.

"Papa," the young man heard her say in a very small voice, "I am going for a little walk with Mr. Mandrake."

He was prepared for any response, from explosive anathema to personal assault; and the silence which followed rather nonplussed him. Being quite pugnaciously disposed to defend his own and his lady's right to an independence of choice and action, he felt the want of a stimulating challenge. Instead, an extraordinarily submissive voice answered in a little the girl's statement—

"Be in to tea, that's all, Pussy."

"Very well, dear," she answered, and came out radiant.

Roger did not venture to ask questions until they were down the steps and well into the Square. Then he looked at his companion in smiling astonishment.

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"What does this portend, Paulie?"

"Something—I can't tell what. But I have rather foreseen it ever since that day he blew his nose at us through the Park railings. Let's be content, Roger, to accept it without asking questions. It is so sweet and peaceful."

"O, Paulie dear! and you are so pretty. What a lucky fellow I am, after all!"

They might have felt less confidence, perhaps, in the reality of this almost religious calm, could their mental visions have looked back into the room from which the placid voice had dismissed them to their gallivanting. The moment the hall-door had closed softly upon them, the Professor skipped to his feet, strode to the window, and from ambush of its lace curtains shook his fist at the despoiler. It was a rather cowardly compromise with his feelings, perhaps; but the Professor was never actuated by the common conventions of behaviour. Having thus relieved his indignation, with the addition of sundry spits and snarls, he prepared to make an expedition on his own account. He had been waiting for the moment with an impatience which had perhaps helped to reconcile him to the removal, by whatever means, of an inquisitive witness to it. Possibly, even, having made up his mind to the inevitable, he was inclined, quite unjustifiably, to number amongst young Mandrake's sins a tardiness in keeping love's appointments. Anyhow, he told himself, as he hurriedly put on his hat and overcoat, he washed his hands of the two.

Emerging from the house, he cast one look as of conscious guilt about him, then started rapidly on foot for Pembridge Gardens. It was quite a short distance away, but he covered the interval in such haste that in

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the end he overshot his mark, and had to hark back to No. 99 by the full length of the street. That, however, is a common experience; and No. 99's number, painted in large black letters on a monolithic gate-post, was, as usual, the only outward point of differentiation between No. 99 and its neighbours. The house was a semi-detached one, cold and solid after the fashion of the pretentious London villa, and seemed to give promise of an austere welcome.

Nothing daunted, however, in his heat and hurry the Professor ran up the steep flight of steps and, knocking at the door, inquired of the doleful girl who came, after a considerable interval, to open it, if Mr. Runciman lived there.

"Yes," she said; but he was out.

O! The Professor bit his knuckles downcast. When was he expected home? The girl believed very shortly. The Professor thought he would like to await his return, if convenient. The girl saw no objection. It would be some relief of the uneventful Sabbath to have a man in the house, though Fortune could produce her no gracefuller specimen than this. The Professor was shown into the dining-room on the ground floor, and left to his solitary cogitations.

Those were alert from the first. He began to take stock, almost immediately, of the room's appointments. They were entirely commonplace, but none the less potential in promise: a solid mahogany dining-table, covered with a chenille cloth; a mahogany sideboard, with a looking-glass in its back, and one plated biscuit-tin on the shelf; a squat black marble clock and two French bronze figures on the grey marble mantel-piece; a massive pedestal desk in the window.

The Professor was not, by temperament, a conscientious man, and his vocation had hardly tended

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to make him more so. Virtuosity sounds very like virtue, but it is not really in the same galley, so to speak. His trade had engendered in him not only a habit of prying and picking, but a conviction of his moral immunity from blame for such. He began to eye the desk.

The house was very quiet. Suddenly a memory of hats seen hanging in the hall occurred to him. Supposing he were to explore there first—were actually to find——

The blood tingled in his veins. He eyed the desk again; then the door. Was he to stand like the ass, starving between two bundles of hay? He crossed the room on tiptoe—turned the handle very softly—listened—not a sound. Treading like a midnight thief, he stole out into the hall, and gained the coat-rack. There were two hats hanging there—a billycock and a silk one. He raised his hand with infinite caution to the latter——

"Not this time, old fellow!" roared a sudden voice.

He whipped round, with a positive little screech, like a trapped weasel. A great inflamed man had come upon him from the rear, with a stealth equal to his own—an enormous whiskered individual, who straddled his legs arrogantly, and made the boards creak in his exultation—a monument of forceful flesh, as unlike the little skipperty figure which had encountered him in his office as a gorilla is unlike an organ-grinder's monkey. The Professor gasped, as he adjusted his shaken spectacles.

"You—you're not Mr. Runciman?" he stammered.

"Ain't I, though?" shouted the giant, "and ready to attest it on every bone of your measly old carcase. What are you a'doin' among my 'ats? Come, now!"

"I—I have made a mistake," said the Professor

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faintly, backing among the coats. "Don't you touch me, now, or I'll bring the law on you."

"Hark to that!" bellowed the stranger. "Bring the law on *me*, he would! Made a mistake, have you? Yes, I think you have, by gosh! You never spoke a truer word in all your life, you old thief."

"Sir, I am no thief," cried the Professor desperately. "How dare you call me one?"

"O!" said the other. "I'm a daring fellow, I am. Betsy, go and fetch a policeman."

"Stop!" cried the Professor in anguish. "I swear I meant no harm. I was directed to this house, it seems, in error. I—I had thought to find another gentleman—a—a much smaller man than you."

"Infernal bad luck," said Mr. Runciman, laughing with a loud disagreeableness, that lapsed afresh into ferocity. "What were you a'doin' among my 'ats, I say?"

"I—I am a collector of antiquities," answered the Professor feebly.

"What!" roared the stranger, "and fingering my bran-new tile! Betsy——"

"It's true," cried the Professor. "My card—pray let me convince you."

He succeeded in his nervous flurry in extracting the piece of pasteboard from his waistcoat pocket, and in proffering it submissively for inspection. Mr. Runciman snapped it away from him rudely, and perused it with a sneering lip.

"It may be a fake," he said, scowling up, "or one you got out of a card-case you stole."

"O! this is simply intolerable!" cried the Professor, passing an insane hand across his brow.

"And anyhow," went on the other, "it don't explain what you were a-doin' among——"

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"Sir," interrupted the Professor in a sudden light of inspiration, "it was simply that I had grown tired of waiting, and was reaching up for what I mistakenly supposed to be my own."

Mr. Runciman conned him gloomily.

"A very good story," he said, "and your own old grease-pot standin' there on the 'all table. But you shall have the benefit of the doubt this once. Take it and get!"

The benefit of the doubt! Was not this poetic justice with a vengeance?

The Professor saw the door open, secured his libelled headgear, and slunk out perspiring.

"Shoo!" shouted a voice violently; he put his tail between his legs, and scuttled down the steps.

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CHAPTER XVII

"O! JOHNSON," said the Director of the Antiquities Department, looking up from the desk at which he was writing, "I wanted a word with you—just so. That person, now, whom I directed you to follow last Friday—you remember?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You understood whom I meant, of course?"

"Never a doubt, sir."

"Was he a particularly small man?"

"No, sir. He was a partic'ly large 'un."

"O!—Johnson, I'm afraid you're rather an unreliable ass."

It is a necessary philosophy of the detective to disregard personalities. He could never "take in" other people if he were susceptible to "roasting" himself. Johnson, thus stabbed, and in the Brutus vein, too, showed no more sensitiveness than a pincushion. Perhaps, by a careful observer, the lower buttons on his frock-coat might have been seen once to rise and fall; otherwise no sign of emotion ruffled the surface of his stolid, official demeanour.

"What would you say," continued the Professor, "to your having followed the wrong man?"

"I should say it was unlikely, sir."

"Very well, then. I have the best proof that you did; and a nice mess you got me into in consequence. Johnson, I am afraid your talents are wasted here."

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"You know best, sir."

"It is the painful conclusion forced upon me. That is enough for the present."

The detective wheeled and withdrew, and the Professor threw himself back in his chair, crossed his legs, and with a very hard expression on his face, settled to the perusal of a book-trade *Gazette*, in which were published weekly lists of second-hand works—either required or to be disposed of. Almost on the instant his eye fell upon an advertisement which sent a shock throughout his entire being:—

WITHERSPOON & CO.

WANTED.—Antrobus's "Notable Swindlers of all Ages," Royal 8vo. Bent and Drummond. 1828.

He dwelt a paralysed moment; scrambled to his feet; snatched down his hat, and made hurriedly for the street. Twenty minutes later he walked into Witherspoon's shop in the Strand and requested a word with the principal.

Mr. Witherspoon was a strong-looking, jet-browed, black-bearded man, whose very aspect was a comfort to the collector. It seemed to say, "Trust me; I'll get you what you want, or know the reason why." If, in the end, the shadow was all that reverted to you, you felt quite confident that the substance was humanly unprocurable. Where Witherspoon failed, no lesser man might triumph. His head was big, and stocked with the gist of a thousand libraries. In mere bulk and courtesy he was the antipodes of the wormy Professor.

The latter came in to him with the *Gazette* folded down in his hand. He drew the bookseller's attention to the advertisement.

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"What's the good of that, you know, Witherspoon?" he said.

The other looked and laughed.

"We lose nothing by the asking, Mr. Urchin," he said.

"O!" replied the Professor. "I've nothing to do with the ethics of your trade. But this seems to me a little tall, I confess."

"Why, sir?"

"Isn't it a wild-goose chase—now, isn't it? No one ought to know that better than you."

"Pardon me, Mr. Urchin. There's the copy late in your hands, and since disposed of. The purchaser might be disposed to part."

The Professor rubbed his chin, his jaw twitching a little. He found in this admission a confirmation of the suspicion which had brought him here.

"I don't think it remotely likely," he said. "But there's the chance, of course. By the way, what makes you jump to that conclusion?"

"What conclusion, sir?"

"Why, that our copy *is* sold?"

"O! I never *jump* to a conclusion. Supposing we assume that it is, anyhow?"

"Very well. The assumption, if I'm not mistaken, won't serve you much. You're acting for a customer, I suppose. Would you consider it a breach of faith to tell me who it is?"

"I'm afraid I should, sir. In these matters, you see, we stand in a confidential position towards our clients."

Poetic justice again! Really, there seemed a fatality in these retorts. The Professor scowled gloomily on his baffler, who regarded him bland but resolute.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Urchin," he said suddenly.

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"I don't know if I'm stretching a point unjustifiably, but, if I am, I'll venture to risk it. Tell me who bought your copy, and I'll tell you the name of my customer."

The Professor, goaded to sudden rebellion, lost his temper and his opportunity.

"No, I'll be (something) if I do!" he snorted.

He was guilty of a strong expression.

The bookseller was offended and alienated.

"Very well," he said coldly.

Oh, that vicious habit of impulse! A thought of diplomacy, a trifle of lying, might have gained him his point. But it was too late.

"Well," he said grudgingly, "I don't know if I won't agree after all."

"No," said Mr. Witherspoon, "I've thought better of it."

"You won't?

"No, Mr. Urchin. I have quite decided."

The Professor knew his man well enough. Without another word he crammed his hat rudely on his head, and stalked out of the private room.

"He's an ill-conditioned old lout," thought the ruffled bookseller.

The Professor strode on his way fuming.

"His customer is my customer," he thought. "There's a connection, a deep purpose in all this. But I've got the book, that's one comfort; and let him find another if he can. I wonder if Witherspoon knows his object in securing it? But of course not. He'd never be such a fool as to let out. The secrecy was only part of that hairy baboon's conceit. He likes to pose as a sort of confidential agent to collectors. It takes off the stigma of the shop."

He had to go westwards that afternoon, to visit one

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or two dealers about Oxford Street and High Holborn. It turned out wet, which increased his depression; and the omnibuses were packed, which made him very cross.

"If I had my rights," he thought vengefully, as he slopped along the streaming pavements, "I should be ruffling it in a thousand-guinea Mercedes, and—and here I am."

He was so much more than he usually was in actual specific gravity, that the weight of water in his trousers alone seemed to make him as light-headed as a Dutch tumbler; and when at length he succeeded in gaining a place in an omnibus at Oxford Circus and had sat down, a load of quicksilver appeared to settle in his feet, anchoring them to the floor.

He was staring saturnine out of the opposite windows as the heavy vehicle rumbled on, watching the phantasmagoria of drenched shapes which drifted past the glass, when suddenly amongst them appeared and vanished a couple, the instant recognition of whom drove the blood to his heart. He could not be mistaken—the vision had come and gone as clear as figures moving on a cinematograph screen—two men walking arm-in-arm—young Mandrake and the little spectacled and red-headed stranger of the Stores.

He tottered to his feet, swayed, caught at the roof-strap, and strode to the door.

"Here!" he cried to the conducter, "I want to get out."

The man twitched the bell, but blocked his way.

"Fare, please," he said.

"I've paid."

"O, no, you've not! Show your ticket."

The Professor, almost foaming, had to spend some precious seconds in settling.

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"You might see I'm in a hurry," he stuttered furiously.

"Your kind mostly is," said the man. "Right away!"

Springing from the board as the vehicle was restarted, the Professor reeled and sat squat upon the pavement, his hat tumbling over his eyes.

"I'll—I'll summon you," he shouted, unbonneting himself. A civil bystander helped him to his feet.

"Shall I take the man's number for you?" he said.

"Yes—no—I've no time—get out!" snarled the Professor, pushing the good Samaritan rudely aside, and he darted off in pursuit of the vanished figures.

He ran past the entrance to Gray's Inn, and for a hundred yards or so beyond, until he had to pause for want of breath. Not a sign of those he sought had he encountered. He felt quite mad with Fortune and all her works. The disappointment was beyond the endurance of reason. He looked insanely about him. What had become of the two? And yet if he *were* to see them and rush upon them, what next? His brain was chaos. He felt only that the juxtaposition of these men confirmed his suspicions of either; that it pointed to a sinister conspiracy in actual process against him; that it discounted once more all that pretence of innocence with which young Mandrake had half succeeded in bamboozling him.

Suddenly, in the midst of his heat, a thought entered to him like a spring of sweet water.

"Of course," he whispered to himself, struggling for breath, "Pauline will know."

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CHAPTER XVIII

MR. MANDRAKE had every desire to satisfy his sweet lady by justifying his claim to her hand on practical grounds. The sole difficulty was to know how to set about doing it; and, in this connection, something, for all the dear girl's very proper insistence on his duties as a man and lover, had to be allowed to his lingering inaction on the score of very paralysing circumstances. For assets he could boast, in common with quite a number of his youthful contemporaries, an agreeable manner and presence, and a fully-qualified diploma to practise under the ægis of the Royal College of Surgeons. The capital, however, which is the sort of bee-bread which is necessary to these embryos for giving life and substance to their young ambitions, was entirely lacking; and, for all the rest, he laboured under the quite exceptional disadvantage of "having been in trouble." A very little of private, and a little more of kindly professional interest, is used to help many of these promising neophytes over the first shoals of their careers. In Roger's case no such assistance was practicable. Even in the unlikely contingency of its being proffered, his pride would have rejected it—and rightly, I think. Tolerant charity is no subject for the tolerance of conscious rectitude. Knowing that he had no past to redeem, he could not consent to advance himself on the supposition that he had. He preferred to cut himself entirely

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aloof from the old, and to build up a new reputation on the basis of a complete independence.

But, how to do it? The problem must be tackled and with infinite resolution. Love had not so far obsessed him, that he had fallen stupidly insensible to the crying necessity. True that he had closed his eyes for a spell on that soft and healing dream; true that he might feel a little plaintive over his Paulie's lively insistence in waking him from it so early. At the same time he was quite alive to the fact that he who would rest most sweetly must labour for his repose. It was hard to have young hands and an iron vigour and no occupation for either. It was the moan, or growl, constantly on his discontented lips.

"Never you mind," said Festus. "'Love will find out the way.'"

He quoted an old song:—

"'Over the mountains, and over the waves;
Under the fountains, and under the graves:
Under floods that are deepest, which Neptune obey;
Over rocks that are steepest, Love will find out the way.'

"Trust to the rogue," he said, "he'll show you."

"He's only one direction," grumbled the other, gnawing his nails, "and that's St. Peter's Square. Very profitable to himself, no doubt; but 'sufficient for the day' is *his* motto."

"And a very good one too, if you don't presume upon it more than once a week. Think what it means storing up against your coming."

"Yes, that's very nice, Festus. But I want the sort of investment that'll go on paying interest to the end of my life."

"And won't this, now? Fie on you!"

"O! please to talk sense."

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"Well, I will, then. Go and rake over the bookstalls."

The young man anathematised all bookstalls with an excessive violence.

"You are perfectly crazed on that nonsense, Festus," he said. "What can you possibly hope or expect to gain out of it?"

"Leave that be," said the other coolly. "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing in a world choke-full of surprises. I'm set on this, anyway; and, if it's just a madness to you, you can humour it or not as you please."

"But, Festus," cried Mandrake desperately, "don't you—can't you understand that to me, knowing nothing of your object, it just appears an utter waste of time that ought to be devoted to much more practical ends?"

"What practical ends?"

"Why, those affecting my position here. It owes everything to your generosity, and—and because of it I'm lulled into a false sense of security. I ought to be doing something—anything—on my own account."

"Well, set up a plate on the door-post, if that will satisfy you."

"Even that would have to be at your expense."

"Ach, now! Is it still the obstinate devil in you? Will you persist in refusing my assurance that I'm your debtor so far?"

"Of course I must, if you won't condescend to explain."

"I've my reasons. I told you I could be as close as a thunder-cloud when I'd a purpose forward. You must allow this one time to mature. It may end in something or nothing—I won't promise."

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"And in the meanwhile, what am I to say to Miss Urchin?"

"Say you're set up in an independent practice. We'll go and order the plate at once. There's many a bile in the Gardens lacks timeliness for its cure, I don't doubt. The law isn't above our mortal weaknesses, and jurisprudence doesn't always express itself in little matters of eating and drinking. You shall start your fortune, maybe, by bunging up some old Bencher's morning liver with a bread-pill. Come along, now. I'm on fire for it."

Roger laughed, but allowed himself to be persuaded. After all, it could do no harm; and at the worst it seemed to give a sort of colour to his resolution. They went out together in the rain, for it was a drenching afternoon, and hunting up a metal engraver's in Holborn, gave their order for a neat brass plate, of professional diminutiveness, to contain the legend (its recorder, smitten with a sense of unreality, could not help regarding it as such, as he wrote it down for the shopman's instruction) *Mr. Roger Mandrake, F.R.C.S.*

"That's settled, then," said le Touzel, with great satisfaction, as they emerged. "And now, my boy, for 'fresh fields and pastures new,' but on the same old hunt for me. And, as for you, you can go home and be making bread-pills."

"Don't think me such an ungracious cub, Festus. I shan't call off from the chase until you've got to be quite convinced of its uselessness."

"Won't you, sonny? That's a good boy. Hark away, then, and remember the song."

"What, 'Love will find out the way'?" said Roger, with a little wry face and shrug. "Well, he's got his legs round my neck and the bit in my mouth, anyhow. We'll see where he'll ride me."

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He seemed conscious, indeed, of a sort of mechanical response in himself to the guiding touch of a will to which he had surrendered his own. Without any deliberate choice of direction, he wandered up northwards, going by way of Southampton Row into Woburn Place, and turning off to browse wherever a patch of bookish pasture showed itself. In the latter-named street he came, at a quiet corner, upon a shop of the kind he sought, but one of a very sedate and classical complexion. The windows were bricked up with volumes of the sober old-calf order, and there were no exterior boxes. However, nothing was to be lost by asking; and Roger made the usual entry, and put the usual question.

The proprietor seemed to relish it. He was a spare, scholarly, abstracted-looking man, in a frock-coat and black skull-cap. It would appear almost as if his business were a personal hobby—an excuse for research, and the collation of rare editions which his soul loved and rejoiced to discuss with casual bookworms. That, perhaps, was why the signs of a vigorous trade were conspicuously absent. The place looked like the corner of a public library, where books might be consulted but were not for sale. He shook his head, with a smile of superior erudition.

"Captain Antrobus," said he, "was a notorious server-up in his time of *chronique scandaleuses*. In this particular instance, however, he would appear to have overstepped the boundaries. Only a copy or two survived the instant censorship. I'm afraid, sir, your chance of securing one is slender."

Roger was in a rather idly discursive mood. Moreover, the shop was compact of a "dryness" which, as compared with the downpour outside, was rather inviting for the nonce. He lingered on a little,

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"I suppose it was some Court scandal?" said he.

"Precisely," answered the bookseller. "What professed to be an authoritative exposure, I understand, of the methods of the famous, or infamous, Mrs. Clarke and the commander-in-chief in selling Army commissions—a scandal, perhaps, a little too recent for discussion in such a volume. But the captain, no doubt, from his position, knew his facts."

"What *was* his position?" asked Roger.

"He was, or had been," said the bookseller, "an attaché of the Duke of York, who died in 1827, the year before the issue of the volume. I know nothing more about him, except that he died at his family seat at a ripe old age and in the odour of sanctity."

"Where was that?" asked Mandrake, more from idleness than curiosity.

"I can't exactly—— Wait," said the bookseller, pondering a moment. "I chanced upon the reference —yes, yes; it was in an old bound copy of the *Lady's Magazine*."

He turned away, reflected a little, fondling his chin, and pounced suddenly upon a shelf in the wall of books, from which he withdrew a volume.

"Here it is," he said, after flicking over the leaves and alighting upon an entry:—

"At his family seat, Danescroft, near Wareham, in Dorsetshire, aged 75 years, much beloved and lamented, Mowbray Faronfield Antrobus, late Captain in the 85th regiment, one time attaché to H.R.H. the Duke of York, and author of several well-known works on social development. R.I.P."

"Well, let us hope he does," said the bookseller roguishly. "But he certainty caused many uneasy hours to others."

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Roger was mildly interested.

"It's not much," said he; "but more than I've ever discovered yet. Would you mind my making a copy of the entry?"

The bookseller closed and handed the volume across royally.

"Why not take the book itself?" said he.

"Why," said the young man, blushing; "I would, only the fact is——"

"If it's for purposes of reference," said the other, "use it, and return it to me when you've done. It has no monetary value whatever."

Roger was profuse in his thanks.

"Not at all," said the bookseller. "It's a pleasure."

In the end the young man walked off with the volume.

He thought, however, so little of his find that he did not even produce it until in the evening, when, as he and Festus were sitting over their pipes, a chance remark of his friend's brought it to his memory; and then he discovered, to his surprise, that there was even matter for excitement in it to the galvanic little Irishman.

"It's just the matter of a trail picked up," cried le Touzel, staring eagerly at the entry, and essaying to turn up and bite the ends of the beard which was not. "We can't afford to despise the smallest opening. I wonder if the man's descendants live there still?"

"But, Festus——"

Le Touzel smacked his hand down on the book.

"To-morrow I go to Wareham, Roger. Will you come too?"

Mandrake threw up his hands renunciatory.

"What's to be done with this madman?" he groaned. "O, yes! I'll come, if only as your keeper!"

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CHAPTER XIX

"PUSSY," said the Professor, bending, very busy, over his knife and fork, as Pauline and he sat at breakfast on the morning following his Holborn experience; "you—you have never told me where you went on Sunday."

The girl gave her dear papa a kindling little smile, very speaking and pathetic, and answered with a radiant softness—

"Quite a commonplace little walk, daddy—only to the Gardens."

The old rascal's heart was even now as obstinately as at any time set on the hope of finding some means to balk a match, in which hateful circumstance had made him only appear to acquiesce. But he had a purpose in his present temporising with the question, and could be, even in such a delicate matter, quite characteristically unscrupulous. He suddenly looked up, and across the table, with an air of wintry ingratiation.

"If I am not to be excluded altogether from your confidences," said he, "would it be venturing too much if I asked what steps the young man is taking to provide a home for the object of his adoration?"

She had been immensely startled and affected by his first question; some indefinable quality of mockery in the tone of the second chilled and stiffened her.

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"I can't say that he has mapped out any definite scheme," she answered quietly. "He is terribly handicapped, of course, in every way. But I have full faith in his manliness and resolution."

The father converted a sneering ejaculation into a cough.

"Hough! Has he—has he any friends?" he asked.

Pauline looked him steadily in the face.

"He has only one that I know of, papa—a man who sympathised with and held out a helping hand to him when every one else had fallen away. They live together."

"O, indeed! What is this good Samaritan's name, may I ask?"

"It is Mr. Festus le Touzel."

"Not a difficult one to remember, anyhow. And is Mr. Festus Le Touzel a fellow student?"

"No; he is a journalist, I believe."

"H'mph! We are flattered by your social connections, though hardly recommended by them, perhaps. But I trust you find his society a full compensation for any loss you may suffer in other directions."

"I daresay I should if I knew him; only, as it happens, I don't."

"Dear me! Not even by sight?"

"I have seen him once."

"A privilege, I believe, I share with you. It is a little red-headed creature, is it not?"

"Yes, thick, standing-out red hair and a red beard."

"I don't recognise the description. And blue spectacles, has he?"

"I never noticed them."

The Professor sank back upon himself, grumphing and puzzling. Suddenly he looked up.

"Well, where *do* they live?" he asked.

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"Their address," said Pauline, "is No. 28, Gray's Inn Gardens. Papa, why are you asking me all these questions?"

His eyes fell before hers.

"In case I ever come to call upon him," he mumbled.

She clasped her shapely hands.

"O, papa, if you *would!* If you would once come to recognise our debt to him, and how there is really only one way in which we can hope to pay it!"

That was very prettily meant. What lesser hostage of fortune than herself, she implied, could be held sufficient compensation for the wrong wrought by her blood-kindred? Her listener was so ineffably mean as rather to encourage than disabuse in her this misconception as to his real intentions.

"Well," he said, "there's no foretelling what to-morrow may bring forth, is there?"

He got into his coat and hat rather hurriedly, unconscious, apparently, of the little fond touchings and adjustings which added a note of significant pathos to the girl's ordinary good-speeding of him on his daily departure. But though she dwelt on the hope of some reassuring response, he managed to escape without committing himself to one.

Mr. Festus le Touzel, was it?—a journalist—*a fortiori* an unscrupulous vagabond! Yes, that might very well be, and he and the young man fit confederates. What if it *should* turn out to be the stranger of the Stores? True, Pauline's description and his own hardly tallied; but were not a cropped head and blue spectacles very easily assumed—the merest rudimentary disguise of the inexperienced masquer? He awaited, with a fretful impatience, the moment when he could temporarily escape from his duties,

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on some plausible pretext, and visit Gray's Inn Gardens.

He had hardly a definite plan in his mind as he hurried into them at length. He was trusting to circumstance to suggest his course, when once he found himself face to face with the startled conspirators, as he chose to consider them. Though that would appear, on the face of it, to be an arbitrary choice, inasmuch as his own suspicions of his absent-minded self were hardly reconcilable with Mandrake's guilt, yet the coincidence of the young man's association with one who wore his hat and wanted his book was surely an argument in proof of some deeply considered and cunningly elaborated plot. In any case, the first essential was to satisfy himself as to the identity of the stranger of the Stores with Mandrake's benefactor and house-companion.

He dwelt, tingling, on the threshold of No. 28, to run over the names of its inmates painted in black letters on the door-posts. Yes, here, sure enough, was the one he sought — *Top Floor: Mr. Festus le Touzel, Journalist.* Primming his lips drily, he set himself to the steep, narrow, uncarpeted ascent. It went up resoundingly by panelled walls, yellow with age and gnawed into holes by countless generations of mice. High up, on a little restricted landing under a skylight, he came upon the name he wanted, duplicated on an ancient, rickety door. Pausing a breathing moment, he rapped smartly on the panels.

Only echoes answered him—so thin, so asthmatic, that they might have been the old building itself trying to cough out a reply. He waited, and tapped again—a second, a third, many times. It appeared evident, at last, that the inmates of the chambers were absent.

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The Professor cursed his luck, and, in a sudden paroxysm of fury, twisted the handle as if he would like to wring its neck. To his surprise, as it turned, the door opened.

Unlocked! That was quite characteristic of the room's owner. The Professor stepped softly within. The place was empty—a bare, ill-furnished little place, equipped with the simplest necessaries to existence.

He stood a minute, his pulses in a tumult. Quieting them by sheer force of will, he listened intently. The house seemed dead silent. Suddenly he was circumambulating the room, on tiptoe, very stealthily—peering into every possible and impossible place that might conceal a secret. Coming round by the door, he started and half staggered. *There, hanging on a peg, was his own lost identical "topper"!*

He seemed to stalk it—positively to stalk it, paw over paw, like a cat approaching a roosting bird. The next moment it was in his hands, and he was going all over it, outside and in, as if in a feline blood-lust.

Just silk and lining, very greasy, and his own name in the corner, as Pauline had written it—nothing else whatever. He had to realise the naked truth at last, after the fifth and sixth frantic exploration; and then——

The Professor, as has been intimated, was subject to periodic attacks of excitability. It pains me to confess how, at this ruinous juncture, he suddenly dropped that long cherished and lamented article upon the floor, and let out a furious kick at it. It flew up, instantly and incontinently, against the wall, down which it sidled with a whisper like the stricken Cæsar's, and lay in a shapeless mass by the skirting. Its dumb, motionless reproach seemed to goad the Professor on

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to madness. Rushing at it, he "booted" it all over the room, until it stuck to his foot; when, coming to his senses, and to the fact or fancy of people stirring below, he pantingly disengaged himself from the incubus, and bolted in a panic for the stairs.

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CHAPTER XX

RAIN was still falling thickly when the two friends started forth at an early hour on their country expedition. Festus had lingered over the propriety of donning his philosophic knowledge-box for a rural jaunt in such weather, and had at length reluctantly exchanged it—seeing that the two had only the remains of an umbrella to share between them—for an old cloth cap which he had unearthed from a cupboard. It was more a matter of the conventions, perhaps, than of taste, seeing the extraordinary visage he presented, with his spectacles and red ball of a head, under this mouldy and misshapen head-gear. But questions of personal fitness troubled him little.

They took an express from Waterloo to Eastleigh, where they had to change into a crawling "local." It was past mid-day by the time they reached the old Dorsetshire junction, hard by the historic Isle of Purbeck, whence the marble comes; and then the rain had ceased, and a soft, semi-luminous mist had succeeded to it.

The porter of whom they made their necessary inquiry, answered them in that yawping Dorset dialect which is just a little less difficult to understand than to reproduce; but which, since the county's most famous poet has claimed for it the distinction of being a separate and independent form of English, shall retain its exclusive independence for me. Let it suffice that

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Mr. Festus le Touzel and his friend left the station just as wise as they had entered it.

Outside, however, they were more fortunate in their encounter with an intelligent and well-informed native, who could put them right, at once and startlingly, on the subject of their quest.

"Danescroft!" said he. "O, don't you know? The old house was burned down some five or six years ago."

At this, and the sight of his friend's rueful visage, Roger, irreverent spirit, was so tickled that he exploded into an irrepressible fit of laughter.

"So we've come all this way for nothing, I suppose?" said he, in a muffled voice.

The stranger smiled sympathetically.

"I'm really afraid so," he said; "if it was the house you wanted to see."

Festus, trying to gnaw his beard, seemed to gnash his teeth at a great rate. Then he emitted a voluminous sigh.

"Well," he said; "that remains to prove. Can you tell me, sir, if Danescroft was still at that date the seat of the Antrobuses?"

"No, it wasn't," said the stranger. "The old family had ceased from it with the death of Dame Alse Antrobus in '93."

Roger stuffed his handkerchief into his mouth.

"O, indeed!" said Festus; "the last of her race, I presume? And the family belongings were all scattered, no doubt?"

"I fancy they were. I remember that there was a sale up at the house which ran through the best part of a week. There was a library of books which, I particularly recall, attracted a good many of the London dealers, and excited some of the keenest competition."

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"O!" Festus let his jaw fall to the most extraordinary expression, and then fondled it back into its normal position. "A library—and London dealers!" he echoed.

Roger still chuckled hysterically. Fate seemed too comically bent on frustrating his poor little friend at every turn. But there were more things in the Irishman's philosophy than he dreamed of.

"London dealers, now!" repeated that unbaffled sage. "But I daresay there'll be your local gentlemen, who'll have been after having their pick of the unconsidered trifles."

"O, no doubt!" said the stranger.

"Secondhand men, now," persisted Festus; "the sort that bid for the scrap lots made up with an eye to their requirements."

"I can answer for one, at least," said the stranger. "I happened to bid against him, which recalls him to my memory."

"O, who's that, now?"

"Hutchins in the High Street. If you cross the bridge over the Puddle, you'll come to his shop on the left in three minutes."

"I'm immensely obliged to you, sir," said Festus, touching his sodden cap. "Over the Puddle we go; and it won't be the first time, maybe, that that same has served a gentleman for his first step to fortune."

The stranger, appearing considerably amused, acknowledged the salutation, and went on his way; and the two friends made for the town.

"Roger," said Festus; "I've a mighty presentiment that we're on the track at last. Look at the sun, now, over those hills!"

It had broken through the mist, and was revealing

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all the high southern coast range in steep above steep of luminous green.

"You're really a dear optimist," said Mandrake impulsively, though he still gasped in a backwash of laughter. "You deserve to succeed, Festus."

"Deserts, my boy," said the Irishman, "have no part in Fortune's favours. But I'll not be denying she has a woman's weakness for a persistent wooer. And here, by the token, we arrive at Hutchins's."

It was a little low-browed, composite store, with bulging, semi-circular windows, packed with the cheap draff of auctions. Brass and copper utensils; smoky colour-prints in chipped black frames; violently daubed Chelsea figures of foresters and milkmaids melting into the white china posts that supported them; glass candlesticks with hanging lustres, suggesting in their broken gaps the toothless stage of a discarded fashion; a profusion of odd wineglasses and stopperless decanters; a row of dusty books, collected sermons, parish magazines and so forth—all the discredited stuff of an age and modes but recently passed, priced at fancy figures, and displayed for lures to that species of embryo collector which can be induced to swallow anything but the conviction of its own antiquarian ignorance—such was the character of Mr. Hutchins's stock. Festus pushed at the door, which burst open to the loud jangle of a bell, and entered, followed by his companion. They could hardly squeeze in, for the choke of nondescript material, fenders, furniture, and bedding, which was piled to the low ceiling. After an interval, a slatternly girl appeared from the dark rear of the premises.

"Hutchins in?" said Festus airily.

"No; father's out," answered the girl.

"O!" said the little man, and rubbed his chin

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reflective. "Books and manuscripts, now," he suggested suddenly. "Anything in that way, my dear?"

She directed them into a little space or alley behind the heaped litter, where was a skeleton fabric of shelves, loaded with a decaying refuse of letters, much of it still tied into parcels as they had fallen under the hammer.

"There's plenty there," she said.

Festus ran a swift, eager eye along the rows of standing books.

"So there is," he said at last. "But little to my taste in all this. Let's be examining the bundles, now. Faith, but there's a show of them. And were they all from the one place, my dear?"

The girl sniggered.

"Likely, isn't it?" she said.

"How should I know how long you've been in business here?" answered the little man. "Not long by the baby looks of you, Mary mavourneen."

She wiggled her shoulders, grinning.

"O, get along with you!"

"But is it?" he persisted.

"I don't know," she said. "We was new to it when Danescroft was sold up."

"What!" cried Festus. "The house yonder that was burned down?"

"That was before the fire," said the girl. "The bundle you're touching come from there."

"*Did* it!" said Festus, with immense self-control. "Only this one, Mary?"

She nodded.

"Then, I'll tell you what," he cried; "I'll buy it, just as it is, in honour of the event that set you up in business, Mary."

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"Get along," she tittered again. "My name isn't Mary, and I don't know what its price is."

"Pooh!" said Festus. "Name your own."

"I'd better call father."

"Just as you like, Mary. Would a sovereign satisfy him?"

"O, yes! I'm sure that would."

Festus extracted and lifted the parcel—it appeared to be no more than a veritable collection of waste-paper—diaries, account-books, pamphlets, and some rolled wads of printed stuff, all yellow with age and choked in dust—but his lips were twitching and his breath coming quickly as he made a cursory examination of his haul.

"Shall I dust it for you?" said the girl.

"No," he answered, catching and squeezing her hand. "Not for worlds. Isn't it the dust, acushla, that connects it with your own pretty fortune—and mine, too, I hope? Now just take that, and when your father sees what a good stroke of business you've been after doing, maybe he'll be for giving you an elegant ribbon to your neck, Mary."

She had no answer but a grin. Roger, walking out of the shop, was aware of a little scuffle in his rear, and of an exclamation and heavy flight as of one eluding the ravishment of a kiss. Festus was a little out of breath as he joined him in the street.

"Well," said the young man, in a tone half bantering, half impatient; "I hope you are satisfied that you have got value for your money?"

"She was a pretty girl," said Festus.

"O, if that's the way you look at it!"

They walked on in rather a stiff silence, until, near the short further limit of the town, the sign of the Bear Inn, a noble, upsitting bruin, burst upon their vision. Festus stopped abruptly opposite it.

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"Doesn't your mouth water for a bear steak, Roger?" said he.

Mandrake smiled ineffably.

"My dear Festus, you have the happiest faculty of thought-reading."

"Wait, then," said the Irishman, "while I go and order us fat ones; and, by the way and by the token, I'll take a squint of the parcel while they're cooking."

"All right," said Roger. "Then I'll walk on to that bridge down there, and come back to the 'Bear' in a quarter of an hour."

"Don't be later."

"Trust me."

He presented himself in the coffee-room on the tick of the nine-hundredth second, and found Festus sitting at a little writing-table in a window, retying the string about his degraded parcel.

"Well," said Mandrake jokingly, coming up behind him; "have you found what you wanted?"

Festus did not answer him for a moment—not until he had secured his final knot. Then he whipped round suddenly in his chair, and his face was as the face of one who has just heard of a great bequest made to him.

"Yes," he said.

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CHAPTER XXI

MR. FESTUS LE TOUZEL spoke little during the remainder of that afternoon, and then only with an obvious effort, which suggested a mind deeply preoccupied. Roger, somewhat awed by that stroke of destiny which was implied in the monosyllabic utterance ending the last chapter, did not venture to break into his comrade's meditations, but munched his steak and "chips" with the best appetite a certain underlying excitement would permit him. An odd new respect for the little acute and pertinacious soul had usurped in his mind a former good-humoured tolerance towards what he had considered the mere whimsical speculations of a scatterbrain. He had no more idea than hitherto what precise purpose lay at the end of his friend's obstinate pursuit; but he was forced at last to recognise a victorious quality in its methods. He could only suppose that le Touzel *had*, by his perspicacity and dogged persistence, succeeded in securing a copy of the book which was reported unprocurable. What followed? As to that he was as entirely in the dark as ever.

The lunch hastily despatched, Festus expressed a restless desire to return to town with all possible speed. The necessary delays and procrastinations of the journey appeared to try him sorely.

"Yes, yes, my boy," he said once, when they were in the dawdling train. "I understand you—I understand."

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He seemed to have become suddenly conscious of the other's anxious and rather wistful inquisition.

"I'm thinking, Roger," he said. "I'm head-under in the deep waters; and when I come up to breathe now and again it's nothing but a gasp of air I can afford for the fresh plunge. Smoke your pipe, and leave me be, sonny. I'll not drown."

He remained more or less submerged, indeed, during the whole journey, until, coming to the surface finally, as they drew up at the Waterloo platform, he skipped to his feet, with a glad blow of relief.

"Now for it!" he said. "O, the glorious potentialities of a metropolis! I feel like the day when we jumped out of Holloway into freedom."

It was dark when they reached the Gardens; but a friendly lamp struck a tell-tale gleam from the door-post.

"See here," cried Festus gleefully. "We've got our hall-mark of merit, Roger; our brazen credentials, my boy. Good luck to the man's despatch."

A thrill shot through the young man's veins, seeing the little brass plate in position—voucher of his own resolution in the teeth of adversity—*Mr. Roger Mandrake, F.R.C.S.* He laughed, and braced his shoulders strongly as they entered the building and ascended to their attic.

Festus, groping, with his hand within the door-way, switched on the electric light, and instantly uttered an exclamation.

"Hullo!" he said. "Who's been here before us?"

He stepped in gingerly, and picking up a battered article from the floor, twisted it round and round in his hands, and then turned with a face of comical dismay to his companion.

"See here!" he said. "My thinking-cap!"

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Roger, peering over his shoulder, was smitten with sudden laughter. He stamped about to recover himself.

"Well, it settles a vexed question for ever," said he. "You'll never be able to wear that again."

Festus, depositing his precious parcel, as if it were so much glass filigree, on a chair, sat himself down on a box, and continued his solemn investigation of the smitten "tile."

"The plot thickens," he murmured. "Ah! you may chuckle, my boy, but I see more in this than meets the eye."

"Do you? I shall never see your head in it again—that's one comfort."

"Hold on, now! This is all a mystery to you, isn't it?"

"O! I am entangled in mysteries."

"Well, *he's* been here, that's all."

"He? Who?"

"Your Professor."

"Nonsense."

"Very well. You've had reason already, maybe, to recognise a method in my madness."

"Festus! What could induce him——"

The little man smacked down his hand on his knee violently.

"What a spalpeen is your own, your Festus! Why, of course, he found it out from her."

"From whom? Found out what?"

"From Miss Paulie, to be sure—found out that we lived together."

"Well, what then?"

"'What then,' says you! Never you mind. He's tracked me down somehow—put a detective on me belike—and come to conclusions. 'Who would have

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thought the old man had so much blood in him?' But I'm thinking he's not gone away with what he hoped."

"What, in Heaven's name?"

"Roger, you never looked into that hat, did you?"

"Why should I look into it?"

"It would have told you something, my incurious boy. Do you know it once belonged to the Professor himself?"

"*What?*"

"Had his name writ inside. There's the 'force and road of casualty' with a vengeance for you."

Roger sat plump down on the bed, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, kicked out his heels, and began to whistle in soft desperation.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I shall understand some day?"

Festus nodded.

"No doubt. And in the meanwhile this is a good lesson for us."

"Is it?—a lesson in double Dutch for me." He stilled himself suddenly. "Had that particular 'Casualty,'" he said, "any bearing on to-day's business? Why, of course"—his eyes opened wide—"it was just after you'd bought the 'topper,' now I come to remember, that you got so rampant about the book!"

Le Touzel sucked in his lips drily.

"Hold your tongue, Roger," he said. "Observation without comment is your rôle. I gave you fair warning, you know. We'll just now put this on one side, and talk of other things."

He chucked the burst and crumpled headgear into a corner.

"Now," said he, "you've been a very circumspect and self-denying confederate, my son, and, for reward,

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I'll just lift a tiny corner of the curtain for you. You'll be thinking, maybe, I lit upon a copy of that Antrobus book this morning?"

"It occurred to me, I confess."

"Well, I didn't, then; but, by my soul, Roger, I did light upon what was as good—the original duplicate and corrected proofs of some of the chapters of it."

"You don't mean to say so!"

"Fact, sir; and, what's more, including the very chapter I'm after. Talk of crazy nonsense to me after that!"

"Festus, you are wonderful. I owe you a real apology."

"Let the debt accumulate. Maybe it'll be worth considering by and by."

"Does it enlighten you as to anything?—does it explain——"

"Steady, now. It supplies an important link. I'll tell you no more at present."

"What is your next step? Will you tell me that?"

"My next step, sir—always in a mortal confidence, mind you—is to go again to the British Museum and consult, if I may consult, a book, Bassett's 'Old London Illustrated,' and, furthermore, make a tracing, granted the permission, of a certain print in that same."

"O, confusion!"

"Not at all, Roger. It's daylight creeping in."

"So it may be to you. I'm at midnight."

"The darkest hour's before the dawn, sir. I foresee a fortune in this for us, if I win, and one, in the manner of it, fitting into your profession. Maybe we'll come to cure the lame and make the blind to see."

"Make me see first."

"I'll consider of it in due course. Roger"—he

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looked up shrewdly and tenderly into the other's face —"to cure the lame, Roger," he repeated softly.

The young man strode up and down the room.

"Well," he said, stopping suddenly, "was there anything else in the parcel?"

"Nary a shred of value," answered the Irishman. "Just some old stuff of accounts and political pamphlets. The thing was part of a lot belike, and bid for in your context of brass fire-guards and carpet ends and photograph frames. Fortune was ever an old rag-picker, you know. And now I'm going to bed."

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CHAPTER XXII

FESTUS came out of the reading-room, leaping hilarious through the swing-doors, like an escaped monkey. A very *ennuyé* young man rose from a wooden bench to greet him.

"At last!" sighed the latter.

"Yes, my boy, at last!" cried the Irishman; "and worth, by the token, a longer entombment than yours in this same yawning necropolis." He tapped his breast-pocket. "I've got it here!" he sang—"here! here! here!"

"What! you found the book and the print in it that you wanted?"

"Aye, did I, and got leave, moreover, to make a tracing of the thing. Another step on the journey, Roger—a hop, a skip, and now for the jump."

"Very well, Festus. Where to?"

"To Tower Street; no less, my son."

Roger lifted his eyebrows and shoulders with an expression of comical resignation. For all that had passed, a ghost of scepticism *would* still walk the secret chambers of his brain.

They took an omnibus up Newgate Street and Cheapside, and alighting at the Mansion House, plunged down King William Street into the roaring intricacies of the City. At the Monument they turned off into the narrow artery of Eastcheap, which, at its

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limit, makes a little bend, and flows into the broader channel of Great Tower Street.

To one of the two, at least, vivid-minded and imaginative, all this latter progress swarmed with luminous company of the past. This way, where giant cranes were hoisting and waggoners bawling about towering warehouses, had come Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, with their *valetaille* of boisterous wits, to hold symposia at the Boar Tavern after the theatrical business of the day was over. Hither, no doubt, between his college terms, had gravitated young Herrick, eager to lay some lyric offering at the feet of his adored comrade and master and eke (and meetly as a singing bird) to wet his own tuneful whistle in canary. Here had Goldsmith, genial and self-important, strutted into the tap-room of a later "Boar," and, all unconscious of the anachronism, grown sentimental over its haunting associations with Prince Hal and Bardolph and the great 'greasy tallow-ketch' himself, Sir John. Hither, again, in after years, intent on a selfsame pilgrimage, had entered Master Diedrich Knickerbocker, a soul as gracious as that other, and as confiding in his poetic faith, with something a like manner of speech, also, as quaint and gentle as that of a whimsical child.

The street, to Festus, was peopled with such ghosts; the close air tinkled with their phantom voices. But, amongst them all, there was none which excited his interest so much as that of a short-sighted, full-bodied young man of thirty-three or so, who had just left his home in Seething Lane hard by, and was coming down, at a brisk but portly swing, into Tower Street. This was Mr. Pepys, Clerk of the Acts, in a periwig, and suit of plain camlet with gold buttons. Festus wondered if, by any possibility, their business, his and

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Mr. Samuel's, could be the same. Mr. Pepys, advancing with an infinite inquisitive canvassing of everything and everybody in general, and any chance pretty face in particular, turned sharp to the left as he emerged from the lane, and went down towards Tower Hill. Somewhere about there, a little short of the historic slope, thought Festus, should be his destination if he *were* bent on the selfsame errand as himself, and if the picture did not lie—but he felt morally confident as to that. He wondered, but could not quite recall, if the Clerk of the Acts had been a superstitious man, or one likely to deliver himself a prey to the arts of the medicaster. But he rather doubted the power of any quack or saltinbanco to get the better of that shrewd common sense. In another moment, however, he would see.

In another moment, in fact, he did see, and with a clearness which scattered at a shock the whole horde of phantasies which had been peopling his brain. *The house he had come to seek was gone.*

He stood for some moments in complete silence, turning up and gnawing an imaginary beard. His hat—a soft black felt, bought to replace that other of which an ironic fate had bereft him—was pulled low down on his forehead; he lifted his hand to raise the interposing brim, and uttered a hoarse ejaculation.

"What's the matter?" said Mandrake.

His own brow was weary, but untroubled. Having no clue whatever to the other's expectations or designs, sympathy over their frustration was hardly to be looked for from him.

"What's the matter?" he said.

He saw only that they were facing a considerable gap in the wall of buildings opposite—one that might have represented the extraction therefrom of half-a-

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dozen houses. A weather-stained hoarding stood in front; on either side the interspace great beams shored the adjacent walls.

"It's been pulled down," said Festus, in a voice hardly more than a whisper.

"What has?"

"The house I came to look for."

"A house? O! that was your object, then?"

The little man seized his wrist convulsively, never withdrawing his eyes from the fatal chasm.

"It was there—standing—a couple of years ago," he said. "I recalled, identified it, the moment I saw the print. What a fatality—and after the sure progression of our steps hitherto! No, no! I'll not discredit the providence of that same. We'll keep our faith, Roger. Only, the vandalism of our progressive times—the vandalism!"

He seemed quite broken for the moment. He fetched a paper, with feverish haste, from his breast-pocket, and unfolding it showed it to his companion.

"See there," he said." "That's what I came to find."

Roger looked with wonder and interest.

"A fine old front," he murmured. "And it's gone? Are you sure of the place, Festus?"

The Irishman refolded the tracing, and hurriedly returned it to his pocket.

"It's not possible I'm mistaken," he muttered. "My memory never yet played me false—and in such a connexion—the singularity and beauty of the thing!"

Nevertheless he seized Mandrake's arm, and urged him away. Once and again they trod the limits of the street; but with fruitless result. There was no building in all its length to correspond in the least with that portrayed in the drawing.

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"Perhaps it may have been re-fronted," suggested Roger, as they stopped once more opposite that forlorn gap.

"No, no!" answered le Touzel, with a groan. "I was too sure from the first." He sighed, and thrust his hands ruefully into his trouser pockets. "Well, my son," he said, "we may as well be going. By my soul, I believed we were come at last to the goal of our quest; and here, it seems, is only the real starting-point to it. But wait, now, while I ask a question first."

It was with a rather queer shrinking feeling that Mandrake saw him approach and accost a policeman who stood directing the traffic in the roadway hard by. The law, as figured in its liveried executive, was still somewhat an object of uneasy suspicion to the young man. Like Casanova, he was inclined to fancy himself the cynosure of innumerable watchful eyes, smouldering under the covert of depressed hat-brims, and weighing him in the balance of doubtful intentions. His latest associations with the "force" had rather upset his old civic confidence in its kindly paternal side. No longer did a constable figure to him for that symbol of refuge and instruction in the midst of a Babylonian confusion which he had formerly typified. He could recognise a deadlier significance under the impassive exterior—the iron hand in the cotton glove. Stolid, inert, almost studiously unintelligent as he was made to appear, there was something Machiavellian about Roberto after all. How, otherwise, could he exhibit that stupendous calm and resourcefulness in the midst of conflicting duties which he was showing at this moment? With one ear bent to le Touzel's inquiry, and the other cocked to the public interest, he could

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answer the first in detail, while remaining acutely alert on behalf of the second. In the very act of dismissing his interlocutor with the information he sought, he turned upon an excited carter with a warning against the use of unparliamentary language, and almost in the same breath checked the whole westward-going traffic with a lift of his hand, in order to enable a nervous old washerwoman, carrying a basket, to cross the road in safety. There was something typically twentieth century about it all, thought Mandrake. It expressed that most stupendous of all modern conceptions—the machine with a soul.

Festus came back to him, infinitely depressed.

"It's true," he said. "It was condemned, with the whole block in which it stood, and pulled down a year ago."

He took Roger's arm, and slowly they wended their way out of the barren labyrinth.

"Festus," said the boy gravely, "I'm very sorry for your disappointment—whatever it is. But I'm bound to confess that in a certain way it's a relief to me. We shall both be able to give over dreaming now, and set our faces to the real serious business of life."

The little Irishman laughed drearily.

"And what's that?" said he—"making money, or making love?"

"Well, the one justifies the other," said Roger.

"I see," said le Touzel: "and by the token, my son, I'd have lent you the way to foreclose on that very proper sentiment by long years belike."

"Well, it can't be helped. That folly's all over now."

"Folly, quotha! O, you're a Sassenach wooer—as cold as the cold proprieties in which you were bred. Thank Heaven you've a warmer friend than yourself.

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Now, d'you think I'm conquered, because I'm baffled? You don't know your Festus, my English boy. This is just a challenge—a stimulus. It whets my appetite for the chase."

Roger sighed, and said no more. It was true his national common sense rebelled against all that implied the fantastic and mysterious. He had been willing to believe his friend possessed of some peculiar knowledge, or theory, which made, or seemed to make, the acquisition of the Antrobus book an essential factor in his own vindication; but now that the book, or the necessary gist of it, was actually in evidence, with no result, apparently, but to deepen the mystery of the affair, and be made a pretext for its further complications, he felt sick of the whole business, and desired only to escape from it into the plain issues of everyday existence. After all, he stood the accepted lover of Pauline, and he could afford to let the tenth point of the law go against him by default, in view of the nine points that possession ruled in his favour. A suspected person could hardly desire more.

The two reached the Gardens in a rather glowering silence. As they were entering their doorway a man stepped out of the shadow of the one adjacent, and accosted them.

"Mr. Mandrake, sir," he said, "may I ask a word with you?"

The young man started and stared.

It was Johnson, the Stores detective.

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CHAPTER XXIII

MR. JOHNSON was a man of a slow-moving mind. He took very long to assimilate an idea; but, when once grasped, it was held by him with a bull-dog tenacity. Such men are dangerous when they come to realise a personal grievance; and Johnson had conceived his right to an absorbing one—he was under notice to quit.

This Draconian sentence, it appeared to him, was out of all proportion with the insignificant nature of the offence which had procured it. He had, on inadequate information, gone astray on a scent—a very moderate error—and his career was to be checked, and perhaps ruined for it. His status being that of a supernumerary constable (attached to the City police force and employed on private service duty) it was hardly to be expected that dismissal on such grounds of incompetency would recommend him to promotion, or, indeed, to any further position of trust whatever. To all practical purposes he was cashiered and put on the shelf. It mattered nothing that he had always been a faithful, and even obsequious, servant to an exacting master; a trifling mistake of judgment was to cancel all that credit. A sense of enormous injustice awoke in his mind, and with it the first fermentings of a deep and savage resentment. The *idea*, long germinating, came uppermost, and to bode evilly for the author of

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his disgrace. The employed detective took to shadowing his employer.

He had always, in his unconscious soul, mistrusted the Director of the department in which he was employed. No man is a hero to his valet, and no commercial antiquarian, perhaps, an Aristides to his confidential servant. Johnson had, in his time, been witness to many a transaction which, in any other than a virtuosic sense, might have been called shady. He had seen rare articles bought cheap on the strength of contemptuous misrepresentations as to their value, and shortly afterwards ticketed in the show-cases at a startling advance on the purchase price. The expert agents of the department, who were always about, picking up curiosities at a nominal figure, were all so many practised exponents of the art of How best to take advantage of Ignorance. The principles of the department, in short, were essentially anti-altruistic, and often verged, not to put too fine a point on it, on positive hocus-pocus.

Now, the confidences of the unjust are given to the unjust on the security of "honour among thieves"; and we all know what happens when thieves fall out—the weaker goes and "blows the gaff." That is rather a harsh analogy, perhaps, to apply to the breaking of the relations between Professor Urchin, F.R.S., and Constable Johnson of the City detective bureau; but the principle of the thing is the point. The weaker trickster, being thrown over by the stronger, began to nurse thoughts of retaliating on his betrayer by exposing him in the fact of some nefarious transaction, and baring his methods to the scorn and execration of a virtuous world. It is true that he had no present data to go upon, beyond the fact of his acquaintance with those methods in general, and a

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reserve of one or two more definite suspicions in particular. But then it had been in his interest to shut his eyes, while now it was in his interest to open them. He would see, anyhow, what a persistent "shadowing" of his principal would bring forth.

That was his pretext to himself, at least, for haunting the footsteps of his quondam master and confidant. Whenever he could procure the opportunity, he followed in them, silent and stealthy, as if borne in the very shadow of their going. The morbid resentment, the dull, purposeless hatred which were in reality the goads to this pursuit were no more realised by him, perhaps, than by his unconscious victim. When the weasel follows the rabbit, over field and through hedgerow, deadly and unswerving through the thick of the petrified warren, he visualises, maybe, no definite end to his chase—he feels only the one blood-lust in his teeth. For the rest, this man knew his own trade well enough, and how to be secret and cautious in its practice.

One morning—it was during the dinner hour—he saw the Professor go out, and followed him as far as Gray's Inn Gardens. The constitutional habit of intense self-abstraction which was characteristic of the Director served his pursuer now as on most occasions. It might be held, moreover, to excuse in the great man a lack of that courtesy and consideration towards one's fellows which expresses itself in a violent driving of one's way through all human obstacles, whether those be wilful or accidental. The Professor flew on like a spirit of storm, his coat-tails ballooning, his great feet crunching tender ones, his shoulders scattering parasols, unconscious of the foam of execrations bubbling in his wake. At No. 28 in the Gardens he stopped, and bent to examine the door-

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post. Johnson, watching at a convenient distance, saw the bony finger travel down the tally, and stop at the bottom, which in such cases usually stands for the top. The next moment the Professor had passed into the building, and was ascending the stairs, pursued, at a judicious interval, by his Nemesis.

There was a little cupboard in the wall under the skylight, fitted with a sink, and handy for housemaids' mops and pails. Into this, padding like a cat, the detective slipped, and was thence, peering through the crack of the door, an astonished witness of that brief dementia which appeared to seize his once respected leader. When it was over, and the visitor fled, he issued cautiously from his eyrie, and proceeded to an investigation.

"*Mr. Festus le Touzel: Journalist.*" The inscription on the door afforded him no enlightenment. Yet—stay! Wasn't the name associated somehow with certain past police-court proceedings? All of a sudden the incident recurred to him. It would be queer if there proved to be some connection between that and this and a third affaîr. It did not seem reasonable that it could all be explained by coincidence. Very softly he entered the room, stood a moment, listened, and, picking up the battered hat, examined it minutely, and, as softly again, dropped it on the floor. He was not one to express emotion by so much as a gesture.

"Love a duck! William!" he reflected. "The Professor's individual tile! How did it come here and what was his quarrel with it? Something out of the common this, and more in it than meets the eye. But, whatever it signifies, I've got a hold on him at last. Detected in the act, my man, of breaking into premises

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during the absence of their owner, and destroying property. I must see this le Touzel."

He so tingled in the prospect of revenge that he would not venture to imperil its possibility by remaining in the room under the risk of being discovered there by its owner. He made one swift tip-toeing inspection of his surroundings, and, first ascertaining that his boot-soles had left no tell-tale prints about the dust of the floor, went softly downstairs. He was a massive man; but it was odd how noiselessly yet how rapidly he could move.

He came back to the Gardens after office hours, on the following day, having found no opportunity in the interval to revisit them. Something on the door-post, which had not been there before, immediately attracted his attention. It was a little new brass plate, recording a second tenancy of the top floor, and the name on it was *Mr. Roger Mandrake, F.R.C.S.*

The detective rose from his examination with a gleam in his eye. No coincidence here at all—it was what he had suspected; but, all the more for that, a strange, complicated business. He cleared his throat, and ascended the stairs a second time, and tapped softly on the door. He took occasion to observe, while awaiting a response, that the name of the new tenant was repeated here in freshly-applied paint. So they actually shared a common chamber? The plot was thickening.

He waited, and tapped again, and once more and again after respectful intervals. It was evident to him at length that the owners were absent. He tried the handle noiselessly; but Mr. le Touzel had taken the precaution this time to turn the key in the lock and pocket it. There was nothing for it but to descend the stairs, and await in patience the return of one or other

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of the tenants. And, behold! when they did come at last they came together. He recognised both men on the instant—and that despite the altered appearance of one of them—and suddenly conceived it to be his policy to address himself to the younger.

"May I ask a word with you?" he said.

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CHAPTER XXIV

MANDRAKE'S face went a little white, and he breathed quickly.

"With me?" he said. "What can you have to say?"

"If you will grant me the favour of a word in private, sir?"

The detective put it to him deprecatingly.

"I won't," answered the young man flatly. He had no reason whatever to vouchsafe this fellow "the most favoured" treatment. He had more than once half-suspected him of being in collusion with his employer in a certain villainous transaction. "Festus," he said, turning peremptorily to his companion, "this is the man who arrested and was witness against me in the matter of that book."

"I see," said the Irishman, and said no more.

"If he has anything he wants to say to me," continued Mandrake, "he can say it in your presence. I'll not trust myself to his hands without a witness."

"I ask no fairer, sir," said the detective. "Mr. le Touzel is quite welcome to listen for me."

"Eh!" cried Festus. "You've got my name, it seems."

"I ventured to call upon you yesterday, sir," said Johnson. "There was one there, I found, before me. I see him, though he didn't see me. But perhaps you found reason to suspect as you'd had a visitor, sir?"

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The Irishman stood staring a moment, then pushed his way to the entrance.

"Come upstairs," he said.

Roger followed, angry and reluctant. No one of the three uttered another word until they were all shut into the room on the top floor. Festus set himself down by the little table, spread his tracing before him, and ostentatiously ignored the others while he examined it.

"Now, Mr.——," he began, his head bent over the paper.

"Johnson, sir."

"Johnson, ease your official bosom with as much freedom as if I wasn't existing. I'm a journalist and reporter by profession. You know what that means? I can be trusted like a confessional-box with the devil's own secrets."

The detective, standing quite quietly, hat in hand, addressed himself with a conscious or unconscious irony to the other.

"Mr. Mandrake, sir, I don't desire nothing for publication in this here matter of a particular confidence."

Roger, who was plucking off his gloves in a very imperious spirit, answered at once and loudly—

"Then you can spare yourself the trouble of giving it to me. I've nothing to conceal, and least of all my opinion of a liar and his tools."

"Not a tool, sir," answered the detective impassively. "You do me a great wrong, sir, if you believe it."

"What?" cried the boy, with a fierce laugh; "you weren't in his confidence, then?"

"No, sir—so little, indeed, sir, that I never guessed until recently what mean tricks the man could be up to."

Mandrake pinioned the speaker with his eyes. The

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detective, calm and immovable, withstood their scrutiny without flinching.

"Festus," said the boy suddenly, turning to his friend, "will you stand for me in this matter—hear what this fellow has got to say, and answer him as you think best? You understand my difficulty—my relations towards—— But you understand. Will you, Festus?"

The Irishman nodded.

"Then I shall leave you together," said Roger. "You can speak to this gentleman"—he snapped on the detective—"as if he were myself, and with less chance, perhaps, of finding yourself kicked down the stairs. If you don't agree, you can go."

Mr. Johnson signifying his passive assent to the proposal, the young man, with a scowl of disdain, caught up his hat and left the room. The moment he was vanished, Festus whipped round in his chair and faced the visitor.

"Phew!" he whistled. "There's more heat than diplomacy in that young brain of his. Now, my friend."

He examined the detective's face curiously.

"Haven't I see you before?" he said.

"And I you?" answered the other.

"At Lady Street," said Festus. "True. Then we can dispense, by the token, with these blinkers," and he removed his blue spectacles, and laid them on the table beside him. "It says something for your official penetration, Mr. Johnson," he admitted.

"Perhaps it does, sir."

"And something for mine, perhaps," continued the Irishman, "that I'm thinking your merits aren't always in the way to be appreciated at their value."

"The cleverest of us may make our mistakes, sir."

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"Exactly, and maybe have them visited upon us unfairly?"

"Meaning, sir?"

"Meaning, as I read it, that you've got the sack."

Johnson was guilty of a movement which, in a less solid man, might have been called a start.

"You've your own ways of reasoning, I suppose, sir," he said.

"No monopoly," answered Festus coolly. "The process is quite simple. The Director of your Antiquities Department came here yesterday during our absence, and danced on my hat, which once upon a time used, as no doubt you've discovered, to be his hat. You would appear, by your own admission, to have been a secret witness of that little diversion; and it wouldn't even surprise me to hear that you've come wanting to tell us about it."

The detective made no answer.

"Well, now," said Festus, "is that the act of a loyal or a recusant servant? and isn't it anyway reasonable to conclude, from your allusion to your recent virtuous discovery of the old gentleman's trickishness, that you've had a quarrel with him, and got the worst of it, and owe him, maybe, a mortal grudge for that same?"

The man's face darkened, but still he did not reply.

"Very well," said the journalist, leaning easily back, "we'll assume that that's the case; and what then? You can't gratify it, I suppose, by helping our friend down there, out of your own private knowledge, to vindicate himself by way of an action for false imprisonment?"

Johnson shook his head slightly.

"As to that, sir," he said in a low voice, "I can only state, on general grounds, my belief in the young

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gentleman's truthfulness in referring the matter to a bet."

Festus uttered a contemptuous exclamation.

"General grounds, quotha! Is it on no better than those that you're asking a private word with my friend?"

The detective was silent.

"Or on what?" demanded the other. "Come, Mr. Johnson, tell me this: is your dismissal connected in any way with that business of the book?"

"No, sir, it isn't."

"Ah! Have you any notion, even, of what prompted your head to come and jump here on my hat yesterday?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Well, *I* have; and what do you think of that, Mr. Johnson?"

"I think you know a deal more than I do, sir."

"You're perfectly right—I do. But I confess to your superior knowledge in one respect, and that is in the object of your present visit—unless it's designed, *on general grounds*, to help you to pay off a score by informing us of something which we'd guessed already."

"I won't deny it is, sir."

"No, faith—you needn't. By the way, Mr. Johnson, it was in the cupboard on the stairs that you'd hid, I presume?"

The detective passed his hand across his forehead. This penetrative understanding startled and alarmed him—stung him to the necessity of a quick admission, if he would justify himself.

"I'll not hide the truth from you any longer, sir," he said. "I hate the man."

"Ah!"

Festus, hooking his thumbs into the armholes of

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his waistcoat and crossing his knees, tilted himself on his chair, swinging indolently back and forth. The detective, sombrely moved, now that he had committed himself, handled his hat nervously and moistened his lips.

"I should like to do him a harm," he said, with a sudden violence; "I should like to treat him as he's for ever ready to treat others, without compassion or consideration, or any regard but for his own interests. I'll tell you the whole truth, sir. I know his manner of dealing with ignorant customers, and I've been shadowing of him of late in the hope to catch him at some of his tricks. It was that brought me to follow him here. I never guessed so much as that you and Mr. Mandrake was chumming it in these rooms, or that I should find what I found when I followed him up the stairs. It took me in the face like a slap, it did, when I seen it, and I thought to myself, here's my first chance against him on the score of forcible entry and wilful destruction of property. That's the on-my-oath truth, sir, and if you aren't inclined to take proceedings on the strength of it, more being behind, all I can say is, make William Johnson your sworn helper to bring him to his knees on whatever other charge you may be considering of in these connections, and you won't have reason to regret it."

The fire in the man leapt irresistibly, from its long smouldering, into this sudden flame, and as quickly died down again. Festus, poising himself on the crisis, lost his balance, clutched at the table to save himself, and swept the tracing to the floor. The detective, bending to recover it, stood as if suddenly transfixed.

"What's the matter now?" said the Irishman.

"O, nothing, sir!" answered the other. "Only I know this here front."

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"You do?"

Festus reeled round, and scrambled to his feet with a gasp.

"What do you mean? Where?"

"It's set up in the Stores, sir, in our big show-room. The Company bought it stock and block when the house was pulled down."

The little man rushed at him with a positive screech.

"Arrah, now, if you're not fooling me!"

"I couldn't be mistaken, sir."

Festus seized him by his coat lapels, as if he feared his melting away before his eyes.

"Is it wanting to do the old man a bad turn you are, Mr. Johnson?" said he, shivering with eagerness. "Find me a five minutes' private opportunity to examine that same front, and by the powers I believe I can gratify you."

The detective rubbed his head slowly, as if in the vain hope to produce a spark of understanding from it.

"Can you do it?" cried the Irishman urgently. "Come, answer!"

"Maybe I could, on a Saturday after closing time," said Johnson vacantly. "I'm the last in my department, and we could be talking together until the others was gone."

Festus, letting go his hold, stuffed his handkerchief into his mouth, as if to cork down the ebullience of his feelings, and danced about the room.

"O, by the triumphal powers!" he cried, in a choking whisper, "was ever such a miracle of luck? O, by my soul! For us to be carrying the war into his own territory, and him all abroad in ours! Was ever anything neater or more beautiful?"

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CHAPTER XXV

SOMEWHERE near Cable Street, Shadwell, off one of the little by-ways that run down towards the London Docks, is a piece of waste ground loosely fenced in, and appropriated to the display of an assortment of wares the least calculated in the world, one would think, to attract a customer. Amongst the heaped old window-frames and doors, piled as if for a bonfire, the stacks of degraded gas-piping, the splintered conservatory lights, the dismembered mantelpieces, the rusty grates stuck with patches of mortar, and the ranks of blackened chimney-pots, one's eyes rove with a sense of wonder over the dreary eccentricity of the choice which could have amassed such a collection. It appears, somehow, very typical of the district, standing towards it, its mean monotony and endless unaspiring ranks of squalid tenements, in much the same relation that a great West End emporium bears towards its own wealthy neighbourhood. This, it would appear, is the very selected stuff of desolation, its choice examples, the place where unloveliness may be expected to come to market. For the things are actually for sale—there is no doubt about it. A yoke—in itself like a battered head-board to a grave, whose supports have taken root and grown into long stalks—announces the fact, and affords a clue, at the same time, to the enormous assurance that fact seems to express.

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"Benjamin Plumpton, Housebreaker Contractor," runs the legend; and one pauses astounded before its burglarious candour, until it is borne in upon one that Mr. Plumpton is in fact nothing more nor less than a demolisher of condemned buildings, and that here are garnered some of the marketable fruits of his wreckage.

Who buys them? Somebody, it is to be supposed, though year after year seems to add its quota to the accumulation. Perhaps such things being the wrecker's perquisite, every rare shilling realised on them is to be accepted in the light of a clear windfall. Perhaps they serve the jerry-builder for his ghoulish aliment. The fact that Mr. Plumpton finds it worth his while to maintain a little wooden office on wheels in the midst of the plot points to the existence, anyhow, of a certain system in his eccentricity.

He was sitting one morning in this selfsame shanty —like one of those hole-and-corner spiders which appear to establish themselves in spots the very remotest from a commerce of flies—totting up, actually, some quite respectable accounts. He whispered out the figures loudly to himself as he did so. In the midst of that necropolis of tenemental bones he was acutely alive. There was much more of mortar than of mortuary about him. His strong, short beard was powdered with it; it gave his clothes a bloom like a grape's. He paused, with a thick finger on the tally, to shout "Come in!"

Somebody was at the door, which flew open with a rattle. A button-nosed face and glaring spectacles appeared in the entrance.

"Hey!" said the visitor; "are you Plumpton? You got my message? My name's Urchin."

Mr. Plumpton stepped down from his stool.

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"O!" he said. You've come about them casements, I suppose?"

"Now what else," said the Professor, peevish and agitated—"what the deuce else?"

"I don't know, if you don't," answered the contractor shortly. "You're under no obligation to look at 'em no more than I am to show them."

The Professor, taken aback, humbled himself.

"No offence, my good fellow," he said. "I'm pressed for time, that's all."

"So'm I," said Mr. Plumpton briefly. "You'd better call another day."

"No, no," said the Professor hurriedly. "I'll wait your good pleasure, Mr. Plumpton, if you're busy.'

The contractor, somewhat mollified, returned to his figures, and made a show, for dignity's sake, of re-attacking them. But he left off in a minute, and put on his hat.

"Now, sir," he said, "if you'll come along o' me."

He led the way to a little open shed, or byre, and pointed to some latticed window-frames propped against a post.

"Them's they," he said.

The Professor eyed the treasure, staring like a basilisk.

"One moment, Mr. Plumpton," he said. "Let me be quite sure of the facts. These casements, according to my information, were removed from that block of old buildings in Great Tower Street of which you were the contracting wrecker?"

"Yes, they were."

"And individually from that low one-gabled house which stood *two doors east* of the building with the carved front."

"That's so. The front went elsewheres."

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"Yes, yes. But I'm not curious about that. I only want to make sure of your memory in this matter."

"Well, you can trust it."

"It was some time ago," said the Professor suspiciously.

"Take or leave," said Mr. Plumpton.

"Now, don't be so short," complained the customer. "It's really a vital point with me. You might easily make a mistake without intending it—a busy man like you. I wonder, now, for instance, if you can recall any odd little 'find' that was connected with the pulling down of that block?"

"There was a green leather book, found in a secret 'ole in the wall of one of 'em," answered the contractor, "if that's what you mean. It didn't come out of the one you're referring to, though—not outer this 'ere. It come outer No. 63 what stood a door or two west of the carved one. I sold it to a second-'and book-dealer—I can tell you where, if you like."

"Never mind," said the Professor. "I may trust your memory, I can see. Only I wanted to make sure. These casements, now (I only learned yesterday of their having been preserved by you)—do they represent all that there were on the front of the one-gabled house?"

"Three on 'em—yes."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Take my dying oath."

"Very well, Mr. Plumpton; then I'll buy them at your own figure—within reason."

Mr. Plumpton had been offended, and he put on a shilling or two for damages to his feelings.

"Where shall I send them to?" he asked.

"I'll get a cab and take them with me," said the Professor.

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Mr. Plumpton laughed ironic.

"I could be delivering of 'em while you was looking for your keb in these parts," he said.

"O, could you?"

The Professor pondered, grunted, and bent to examine his purchase.

"Will you wrap 'em for me in sacking, here, now, while I look on?" he asked. "I won't mind a small extra charge. The fact is"—his jealous anxiety found a pretext—"I collect old things like this, and I wouldn't for the world risk so much as a pane of the glass that's left being broken."

Mr. Plumpton, conscious of a rumness in his customer, consented, with a twinkle in his eye; and the Professor, having waited throughout the operation, departed with what sense of satisfaction the prospect of some hours of hope deferred would allow him. He suffered a hundred apprehensions in the meanwhile. He should never have let the things out of his sight after once securing them. Supposing they were to go astray? Supposing there should be an accident by the road? Supposing—worst contingency of all—that his particularity had awakened a corresponding spirit of inquiry in Plumpton, and led that anatomist of carcases to a little private dissecting on his own account? His temper all during that afternoon was something deplorable; and when at length the hour of his release arrived, he broke from the restraints of office more like a schoolboy than a dignified Professor, and rushed home on the wings of the wind. And here, to his relief and satisfaction, he found that the stuff, intact as he had parted from it, had arrived before him.

He was silent and abstracted to a degree during dinner. Once only when the meal was finished, and

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he and Pauline had arisen, the one to withdraw to his study, the other to her piano, did he appear to become suddenly and acutely aware of his daughter's presence.

"Pussy!" he said sharply.

She turned to him.

"Your foot is not worse?" he asked.

She answered, "No, papa," in some wonder; then paused once more, as she was going. "What makes you ask me?"

"It struck me," he said, "you were appearing to limp more than you usually do."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Sometimes I fancy," she began, then as suddenly repudiated the suspicion to herself. "It's the weather that affects it, I think. Don't bother about it," and she left the room.

Standing looking after her in profound reflection, he suddenly began to mutter oddly to himself—

"Is it to be for me—the knowledge and the privilege? Once made perfect, and at my hands, perhaps she'd return to her allegiance—dismiss and forget the fellow—assert her right claim to the first and best. Peerless—without a flaw, then; her daddy's prize Pussy!"

He shuffled off into his private room, removing his spectacles as he went and rubbing the glasses. A sudden moisture had dimmed them. He was a man of contradictory moods, mostly unpleasant; but there was always this one to his credit.

As he readjusted the things on his nose, and the vision of a great package, wrapped in sacking and leaned against the wall, came into their focus, his whole face puckered into a network of hilarity. He rubbed his hands and shuffled his feet; then shut the door sharply and locked himself in.

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What happened behind those closed panels? One could only surmise by the sounds. They rose crescendo through the space of an hour or so, beginning with soft tappings and scratchings, chipping into chisel work, grating into the hawk and spit of a saw, exploding into the violent racket of a hammer—finally, delivering themselves up to a fury and confusion of uproar, in which the bursting of glass, the splintering of wood, and the vociferations of a rageful human tongue were all commingled. In the end, just as Pauline, running from above, and the servant, rising from below, had met in the hall with panic-stricken ears and pale faces, with one last diabolical crash the pandemonium ceased, and thereafter was peace, such as settleth itself to abide among the ringing ruins of the tempest.

"Lawk, miss," quavered the "tweenie" in a whisper, "whatever's been the matter with master? His langwidge have brought the soot down the kitchen chimley."

As she spoke the door of the study was flung open, and there, glaring and maniacal, with chips of wood in his hair, and his feet among the shapeless wreckage of three window-frames, stood the Professor. One moment he dwelt thus, then plunged for the stairs, screeching as he went.

"Get to bed, you drabs and hussies! What are you doing here? Don't speak to me, Pauline—I won't bear it—do you hear me? And no more of that affected exaggeration of lameness, miss. I know you and I won't endure the nonsense. Maria, shut your mouth or take a month's warning. How dare you gape at me like that! And if you touch a stick in my room, I'll prosecute you—I'll —— !"

He disappeared into his bedroom with a positive

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howl, and the door slammed upon him. Maria was weeping hysterically. Pauline assuaged her terror with soft, cold comfort. Gradually the house lapped itself in an uneasy repose. But the spirit of disturbance survived into the following morning. The Professor came down to breakfast baleful and unregenerate. His daughter preserved an obstinate silence. It was a weight of thunder lifted when he departed for the office.

He took his atmosphere with him, a pregnant and portentous burden. He was resolving upon a final desperate throw against fate. "*L'audace, encore l'audace, et toujours l'audace.*" Danton's was the only motto. To beard the lion in his den was his last resource.

He was so full of spleen, nevertheless, that, seeking for some object on which to vent it, he was gratified, like a small mind, to remember that this was the day, the Saturday, which terminated William Johnson's connection with the Company. He took the occasion to watch the man at his work, gloating over the thought of his own petty omnipotence. He could still be supreme within the bounds of a department.

He would have wished to see the detective off the premises but for two reasons—one, that Johnson owed his final report not to him, but to the general manager, and, two, that, with the arrival of the moment for closing, his restless impatience could not outstay the prolixity of a little black-haired, black-moustached gentleman in pince-nez, who was disputing some point at great length with the officer. In the end he left the two hammer and tongs at their colloquy, and, hurrying into the street, turned his steps towards Gray's Inn Gardens.

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But ill-fortune still dogged his career; and, snaring him by the way into a lengthened controversy with a dealer, delayed his arrival at Mr. le Touzel's chambers to that very psychologic moment which brought their owner's following footsteps into the field of his destiny. Festus saw, understood on the instant, and whipped into an accommodating doorway.

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CHAPTER XXVI

A SMALL gentleman, with close black hair and a little wormy curl of moustache, slipped in at the doorway in the Gardens; a small, clean-shaved gentleman, in blue spectacles and with a fiery cropped poll, issued from the same doorway a moment later, and proceeding to one a few numbers further on, ascended the stairs towards the chambers of Mr. Festus le Touzel. On his way up he encountered a stranger coming down, and was by him accosted with a sudden violent eagerness—

"Mr. le Touzel, I believe, eh?"

"You have the advantage of me, sir," said the Irishman coolly.

"Yes, yes," answered the Professor. "But a word with you, sir—just a word, if I may beg it."

"I'm no curmudgeon, sir," replied the other, "and no lawyer."

He pushed by, and led the way up the few remaining stairs into his attic. Mandrake was out, and the two had the place to themselves. The Professor cast a curious, half-guilty look around.

"Not many superfluities here," said the Irishman, "and more room, by the token, for free speech."

"I'll take you at your word," answered the Professor; "and for the chief reason that any subterfuge of mine would, I am convinced, alienate you without helping me."

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"That's a very sound moral conclusion, anyway," said Festus.

The Professor, his lips nervous, focussed the great spectacles on his quarry.

"Sir," he said, "whether it's moral or not I don't care a hang! It's merely a question with me as to which sentiment is likely to pay best, candour or craft, and I see my profit in the former."

"Very well," said Festus. "And I acknowledge the compliment to my penetration."

"Will you make the frankness reciprocal?"

"No doubt I'll be for speaking my mind, sir."

"Will you assure me then, in truth, that I have the advantage of you?"

"O! as for truth, I'm thinking I've met you before."

"Exactly. At the Stores."

"At the Stores it was. I went inquiring for a book."

"Which book, *en passant*, you have failed to secure, I presume."

"Which book, *en passant*, I have failed to secure."

"Ah! ah! Well, Mr. le Touzel, may I recall to your memory how upon that occasion you remarked upon the particular attention I paid to the hat you were wearing."

"It was very noticeable indeed, sir."

"You guess the reason now—be honest—don't you?"

"I don't know about *the* reason, sir. You've given me some to suspect you bore a mighty grudge against the article."

"It was unpardonable, I confess. My excuse was a fit of temper following upon a very keen disappointment."

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"Was that so? But I don't know what you were doing breaking into my chambers at all."

"I had come to visit you, and found you out."

"*Did* you!" thought the Irishman. "I'm for questioning that, old gentleman," and he added aloud, "Same errand as to-day, I suppose?"

"Yes," said the Professor, only more or less dissembling.

"Well," said Festus, "the hat cost me tenpence, hard cash. I bought it under emergency in the Portobello Road."

Professor Urchin took a hurried step forward, and checked himself.

"I'll pay compensation, of course," he said, "and be beholden to you, moreover, for not pressing the matter. But, as I tell you, a very sharp disappointment was connected with my discovery of it on your wall."

"Indeed, now?" said Festus. He was sitting on a box and examining his nails coolly. "And what was that, may I ask?"

"Mr. le Touzel," said the Professor, struggling to suppress his emotion, "I had recognised my own hat the moment I saw it in your hand. It had been parted with under a misapprehension as to its inherent value—to me, of course," he added hastily—"purely and solely to me. There was, or should have been, unless I am greatly mistaken, a piece of inscribed parchment slipped behind its lining—a fragment of a curious antiquarian interest—a thing of no value whatever to any one but a collector, but to him, on account of the antiquity of its characters, of quite extraordinary importance. I had hoped, by some fortunate chance, to find it still lying intact where it had been, *if* it had been, concealed."

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"It had been," said the Irishman, still critical of his finger-nails.

The Professor positively leapt.

"Had been!" he almost screamed. "And you destroyed it?"

"No," said the other, and tapped his breast. "I've got it here now in my pocket-book."

Professor Urchin stood a moment as if paralysed. His voice vibrated like a top when he could find words for it at last.

"You-you-you-you can establish no claim to it, you know-no-no-no. There was no intention of including it in the bargain. To-to withhold it from its rightful owner would be a question of the last iniquity. I'll go so far as to say it would be felony—it would bring you within the law, sir. I trust you won't force me to extreme measures."

Festus, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, strutted out his legs, and, whistling softly, considered his visitor, his furious excitement and menacing tone.

"By my soul! old gentleman," said he, "you're a bad counsel for yourself. What's agitating you now? Is it your conscience that's troubled to make restitution to an unhappy victim of your mistakes, now you've the full proof of his innocence?"

The Professor, utterly insensible to the necessity of *that* restitution, consigned Mr. Roger Mandrake to the depths.

"I'll trouble you for an answer," he demanded shrilly. "Are you going to give me back my property or not? I tell you it's of no use to any one but myself, and I'm quite ready to compensate you for the hat."

There was no telling what he contemplated in the

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event of a refusal. He looked rabid and desperate—like a long-legged spider balancing for a spring on a diminutive fly. Festus, making a face, thrust his hand into his breast, brought out a pocket-book, and, while the other watched him greedily, set about unstrapping it deliberately. In the midst he paused and looked up.

"If *I* give you back this," said he, "*you'll* be, perhaps, for giving back my friend his own?"

"*Will* you return it me, sir, without any more words?" snarled the Professor. He believed he had reason to congratulate himself, after his usual fashion, on the conquering force of ill manners.

The Irishman extracted a little folded enclosure, nipped it tight with his left hand, and held out his right.

"Where'll be the compensation, now?" he asked.

The Professor hurriedly fished for a shilling and presented it.

"You needn't trouble about the change," he said.

Festus let out a little explosion of laughter, but almost in the same moment recovered himself to an enormous gravity and proffered the exchange.

"Is that what your wanting?" said he.

The Professor seized the scrap of parchment, unfolded it with trembling hands, uttered a wild, rapturous ejaculation or two, and, without another word of grace or ill-grace, hurried from the room. Festus, listening to the clatter of his descending footsteps, fainter and fainter, until they passed into the Gardens and were lost, neither stirred nor smiled. A strange solemnity of expression appeared to have usurped in his face the usual shrewd levity which

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characterised it. He looked like one upon whose head the winged symbol of a knowledge unutterable had descended for good or evil. But in the meantime a great awe and gravity were illumining his eyes under that white presence.

END OF PART I.

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PART II

CHAPTER XXVII

ALL London was talking about Torcello. We venture the assertion on the authority of the gentlemen with the ravenous little pencils and frayed shirt-cuffs, who day and night bustle in and out of the newspaper offices, and make immense general statements on the smallest possible data with the greatest show and the least right of warranty in the world. "All London was talking about"—— "Nothing else was spoken of but"—— "It was the sole topic of conversation at the clubs," &c. What an impression of the magnetic self-centralising, radio-concentrativeness of the Press are such terms calculated to convey to us! What pictures they call up of stupendous and intricate bureaux, equipped with a hundred shining instruments for recording automatically the gist of all the speech and almost all the thoughts of mankind for miles around! The candle-snuffy little journalist who has discussed with one or two cheap colleagues at a cheap club the latest theatrical betrothal, or the latest military exposure, or the latest political scandal, and who has afterwards embodied his personal enthusiasm in such a generalisation, does not enter into the picture at all. And it is not necessary that he should. If the public likes to pay for information as to talks of its own which it has never talked, it would be crass folly

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on the part of the newspapers to disappoint it. All London, therefore, says our informant—and the phrase shall stand—was talking about Torcello, and that statement, no doubt, if you read your "daily" with a daily reverence, you will accept as embodying a literal fact.

Who and what, then, was Torcello? *He* was a Remedialist—the one and only Remedialist, if his personal testimony went for anything; and it is certain, at least, that his claim was not to be confuted by the dictionary. Moreover, if London in its entirety could not he held cognisant of the fact, it is equally certain that Remedialism, to the section of it which counted—the leisured classes, that is to say—appealed with all the force of a religious discovery.

No one knew whence Torcello had come or what were the secrets of his force and origin. That he was suddenly in the fashionable midmost, a seer, healer, and mystic of quite indescribable parts was sufficient for the select imagination. He did things, and without any nauseating pietistic flummery—that was his common-sense value; he effected instead of affecting cures. He was always quite ready to admit the limits of his craft; but within their liberal boundaries his penetration was supreme. His faculty for tracing organic disturbance to its roots, and thence suggesting the inevitable reconstruction, seemed nothing less than inspired. For a whole season he was the petted Cagliostro of Society. And he made money—coined it, banked it in bags and rouleaus, and flourished exceedingly.

There was once upon a time a popular rally, "Have you seen the Shah?" which was much affected by the vulgar. It had its refined successor in these days in "Have you been to Torcello?"—a question implying, as it were, *the* direction in which to seek the

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only sure surcease from bodily or mental ailments. If Torcello could not cure you, then your case was beyond remedy.

That, in fact, was what old Colonel Blagdon said to his crony, Major Anstruther, late of the Blues, and at present in them. The Major had an only son, a dear boy whom he called Chakky. Chakky, until recently a lad of bright promise, had all of a sudden developed fancies. He could not eat, he could not sleep, he was moody, he pined visibly before his devoted father's eyes. There seemed nothing constitutionally wrong with him; doctors many and wise had examined, treated, dieted—all to no purpose. The youngster was grown nervous to a degree—like one, even at that early age, conscious of the shadow of some great calamity overhanging him.

"Take him to Torcello, I tell you," said old Blagdon at the club luncheon-table.

"I know nothing about the fellow," protested the Major gruffly. He lived over Regent's Park way, and suffered under the grievance of being a sort of country cousin to Belgravia.

"Don't see how his family history would benefit you," said the other. "He cured my gout—that was enough for me."

"A quack, I'm told?"

"O! you may call him what you like. What's in a name, hey? The profession, of course, turns up its nose at him, but he makes no claim that I know to dispute its prerogatives. There's a qualified man in the house—to give the thing a legal colour, I suppose."

"Where does he hang out?"

"That's the joke of it—in Wigmore Street, right in the thick of the gallipots, if you'll believe me.

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He's fell and settled among 'em like a live shell. They're in mortal disgust of him, but they give him a wide berth."

"Well, there can be no harm in his seeing the boy. I'll take him there this afternoon."

The Colonel cackled.

"What's your impression of the man and his reputation? It don't fit in with the facts, anyhow. I tell you, my dear fellow, he's as remote and almost as inaccessible as the Commander-in-Chief. Call this afternoon? O, yes! we'll call, but it'll only be to make an appointment—for this day week, if we're lucky."

Major Anstruther was enlightened as they drew near the house in Wigmore Street. At one very notable point was the habitual decorum of that staid and awful physicianry characterised by what one might have described as a local disorder. Carriages and motor-cars of every degree of costliness lined the kerb, their commissure, as it were, a particular dark purple door, by way of which people were constantly entering or emerging. Regularly, as they did so, individual cars curved from the rank and went humming away, the gaps they left being as regularly closed by the next in waiting.

"Raking in the dibs," said Colonel Blagdon; "simply raking 'em in, they say."

The two ascended the steps to the door, which opened as they reached it, discharging a tall, thin-featured young man in pince-nez. He and the Colonel recognised one another.

"Seeking the oracle?" said the stranger. "It's all bally rot. Don't you be took in like me, Blagdon. Told me to put my house in order, the old cheap-jack!"

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He went down, with a scared look, and jerked away up the street.

"Hullo!" said Major Anstruther softly. "I don't want this sort of thing, you know, Blagdon."

"Pooh!" answered the Colonel; "the man's death in his face; no need of a seer to tell us that."

A massive, imperturbable-looking porter, dressed somewhat like an hotel commissionaire in a gilt-buttoned frock-coat and bullioned cap, admitted them and made a formal inquiry.

"No appointment, gentlemen?"

"None," answered Colonel Blagdon. "We want to make one."

The Major fumed.

"Look here," he said, pushing forward, "I desire to see—what's his confounded——"

The Colonel interposed.

"Kindly book an appointment, the earliest possible, for Major Anstruther and son."

The door porter, majestic and passionless, produced a book from a marble table hard by, and made the necessary entry. The Major, mutinous under this mastery of calm officialdom, shifted and sputtered.

"Do be reasonable," whispered his friend to him.

He simmered down wrathfully under the rebuke, and looked about him with disdain. Everything in his surroundings contributed to hush and solemnity. The hall and stairs were thickly carpeted in deep purple. From a window high on the landing above a soft chrysoberyl radiance flowed through sea-green glass. A lamp of the same colour burned in a steady spark from the ceiling. "Catch-penny bunkum!" thought the Major.

"Three, punctual, Thursday next," said the porter.

The Major burst out—

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"Three! punctual! Why, confound you! supposing it doesn't suit me?"

"Very well, sir," said the porter, "I'll cancel it. This way to the door, please."

The Colonel seized his ebullient friend's arm.

"No, don't," he said over his shoulder. "The appointment stands."

The next moment they were in the street.

The Major let a space intervene; then he unbottled himself.

"The infernal, insolent jack-in-office! If I keep that appointment, may I——"

"I suppose he has to be systematic," said the other soothingly. "When time means money to that figure, you see."

"I don't see."

"Put it to Chakky, then."

The Major was silent.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

MAJOR ANSTRUTHER kept his appointment, contenting himself with claiming it, in a masterful and peremptory tone, of the immobile porter, who was as little affected thereby as a prize bullock is by a prod from a landed proprietor's finger. He was shown, with his son, into a luxurious waiting-room on the ground floor, where were already seated some prospective patients of the Remedialist—two costly young ladies and an invaluable youth with a dissipated eye.

Chakky, a bright, clean-limbed boy of fourteen, with a very thin face and preternaturally large orbs, made up in curiosity for his father's surly affectation of indifference. The soft, sombre appointments of the room, the dark, richly-framed pictures, the vivarium in the window, clouded with moist distillations, and peopled with languid reptiles—orange salamanders, emerald-green tree-frogs and slowly-pulsing chameleons—kept him at a perpetual twist and wriggle of excitement. His imagination was already delightfully stimulated by the time they were silently approached and beckoned, by a stately person like a butler, into the unutterable presence.

The Remedialist's sanctum was a ground-floor room of no great dimensions at the rear of the building. It was very plainly furnished in a style of costly simplicity; and the one peculiarity which characterised it was the perpetual use of artificial light. The

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windows were heavily shuttered and curtained; right under the ceiling burned a brilliant electric globe; noise, here as elsewhere, was jealously swaddled away. The place opened upon the new-comers like a glowing adytum of silence.

It was tenantless when, passing between thick-falling curtains, they were ushered into it and left alone.

"My eye!" tittered Chakky, a little high and nervous.

"Hold your confounded tongue!" snapped the father gruffly.

Almost with his words there sounded a soft swish and sigh, and the Remedialist, parting and releasing a couple of deep violet hangings in the wall, stood before them.

"Just a common or garden lift," sneered the Major within himself. "That's not going to impose on me, you know."

"It communicates with my colleague's chamber above," said Torcello—quite simply, just as if he were answering the unspoken thought.

Major Anstruther started, and bent his heavily thatched brows on the stranger. He saw before him a purely conventional figure, very slight and small and rather youthful-looking, in a neat frock-coat and dainty linen. The creature's hair was sleek buff, parted in the middle, and above the common in length; he wore green spectacles on his nose—there was nothing to differentiate him, in the way of peculiar force or character, from the ordinary dealer in simples and galenicals. He looked even mild, meek, and insignificant—something in suggestion like a Raphaelesque chemist.

"I beg your pardon," said the Major gruffly. "I wasn't conscious of my questioning anything."

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The seer smiled, and put the matter by with a quick nervous little hand.

"This is your son?" he asked.

The Major admitted the fact gruffly.

"You wish my opinion on his case?"

"How do you know that?"

"Surely, sir, a father would not desire a child's presence during a consultation on his own?"

The Major laughed aggravatingly.

"A very proper conclusion, Mr.—Mr. Torcello; but its wisdom is a little self-evident, perhaps."

"There was none implied, sir, but by contrast with the folly which evoked it."

The soldier stared and swelled. The empty arrogance of his profession was blatant in him; but Chakky, after all, was the apple of his eye. He subdued his feelings for the boy's sake.

"I daresay you're right, sir," he said; "but—excuse me—any claim to supernatural gifts always make me suspicious and sceptical."

"And you understood that to be put forward here?"

"I—yes, I was told so."

"Then I am to believe that you propose to take advantage of my reputation, while retaining your own opinion as to its worthlessness?"

"My opinion will adapt itself to results, sir. The case of this youngster of mine"—he pulled the boy nervously forward—"has for months now baffled the best skill of some of the best of those who——"

He paused, biting midway the projected insult.

"Major Anstruther," said Torcello quietly, "let us start by being quite clear as to what my pretensions, as you would call them, are. You may have heard of the Frenchman's sigh: '*Si jeunesse savait: si vieillesse*

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pouvait'—'If youth could know; if age could do.' I am age in youth, that is all, and, in so far, my vision into the sources of good and evil is an abnormal and super-penetrative one. You cannot understand? There is no man in the world that may or shall. My secret is my Golconda, my Kimberley. Is not that frank enough for you? For the rest, my power is not limitless, but it is considerable. It consists in the knowledge that enables me to excavate to the roots of much trouble and evil, and to cut short the succession there of diseased issues. I may be able to cure your son; I may not. Of this I can at least assure you: if there is a remedy for his case, I can supply it; if there is none, you can ease your heart of its scepticism and your pockets of their gold on the less scrupulous orthodoxies elsewhere. Only remember that I never desire or admit more than a single consultation, and that my fee for it is ten guineas."

He ended, as he had begun, perfectly quiet and self-possessed. The Major, standing a moment like one bluffed and staggered, suddenly thrust the boy towards him.

"Ten," he said hoarsely. "There, I'll—I'll make it fifty, if you're successful. This is what's the matter—the——"

"Never you mind that," said Torcello. He put his right hand on the boy, with a smile—rested it on the young forehead, under the fresh hair. "There," said he—"don't move. Let it be so a moment. I'm going to switch off the light. You won't mind, will you?"

"No," said Chakky, gulping a little.

"That's right," said the seer. "It's just a minute's touch and over. Perfect quiet from all, if you please."

He pressed a button let into a little table by which

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he stood, and the soft shock of darkness fell like a trap. One could hear the stiff-lipped Major holding on to himself, as it were, in the black silence. His orthodoxies were having a terrible struggle there with his affections. Once he thought he saw a tiny violet-tinted nebula rise like a point of faintest luminosity into the darkness, poise itself some five feet approximately above the ground, dwell steady a minute, and then fall swiftly and disappear. But he could not be sure. Suspicious and nervous, his fancy for the first time in his life was overcrowing his reason. The minute was a long and trying one to him.

And then, behold! light returned, like a sigh and smile out of sleep; and there were Chakky and the Remedialist restored in the exact places where they had gone out. The boy grinned and moved.

"Is that all, sir?" he said.

"All for you, my fine lad," answered the sage. "Now come along, while I return to have a word with your father."

He drew the curtains from before the lift, and, with the Major's passive assent, took the boy a journey up to the next floor, where a very pleasant young doctor received them, and undertook the charge of Chakky while the other was interviewing the Major.

"I've just left him with my colleague, while we talk," said Torcello, down in his room again.

The soldier, between mental relief and constitutional arrogance, could hardly suppress his impatience.

"What did you find out?" he demanded hoarsely—"anything, nothing? What the deuce, man—can't you speak? But I suppose it was nothing."

Torcello stood square before this armigerous convention, and there was a suggestion of something

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emitted from the eyes behind the green spectacles which might have been sparks of a bellicosity by many degrees hotter than that which professionally sought to overawe him.

"Hold your tongue, and listen to me," he said. "What you suppose isn't valuable."

Major Anstruther fought for words in vain.

"Your wife—the boy's mother," said the seer. "There was an unhappy occurrence connected with her death."

The Major found relief, and gasped.

"If you ask me——" he began.

"I don't," said the other. "I'm telling you the facts. It was at a time when she was promising to present you with this bright youngster. She was in bed. A picture fell from the wall, knocked over a candle, and set alight to the dress of her nurse, who was burnt to death almost before her eyes."

"Good God!" whispered the Major. He shrunk astounded before the lambent green glasses.

"She never properly recovered from the shock," said Torcello, "but died before Master Chakky was a year old. What became of the picture?"

"It was destroyed."

"It wasn't."

"I gave orders."

"They weren't attended to. You didn't like the picture, anyway?"

"I didn't. It was a portrait of a rascally ancestor—a rascally, vulgar interloper into my family, who prevailed by impudence and hated us. I was glad of the excuse to get rid of him."

"You entrusted the task to whom?"

"To Mademoiselle Fanchet, our French governess."

"She didn't relish it, I expect. She was in love, no

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doubt, with his fine bold eyes. I'm thinking that, instead of destroying the portrait, she faced it with a common print, and hung it in her own room, so that she might continue to feed on it in her privacy. It hangs there now, if I'm not mistaken."

"Not her room any longer. She's left us months ago."

"Perhaps Master Chakky has been moved of late into the room that used to be hers?"

"He has, now I come to think of it. Heaven preserve us!"

"Remove him, then. At the same time look out that portrait and destroy it with your own hands. He'll recover fast enough when you've done it. Send me the fee when you're convinced."

The Major stood like a man of eld to whom a voice had suddenly spoken out of the inanimate. Bricks, and mahogany furniture, and stately porticoes, and dignified suitings, and all the other solid evidences of material possession, could never be quite the same things to him again. He begged Torcello presently, in a funny little voice, to send him down his boy.

A week later he wrote—such a letter as emotion might wring out of an incurable convention of stiffness. He had actually found and destroyed the portrait, he said: the thing had gone up the kitchen chimney in a shriek of flame, and—Chakky was on the high-road to recovery—almost his old self once more.

It was marvellous—"out of all whooping." He regretted; he apologised; he would never discredit the possibility of abnormal gifts again. At the same time he requested the seer to keep his secret for him. If he himself was a convert, he preferred prying fools to be put off with natural explanations. He was not

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apt at expounding any convictions but those to which he had been born and bred, and if he tried he would only bungle the business. Finally, he begged——

A cheque for a hundred guineas was enclosed.

That was a specimen of Torcello's methods during this period of his fame, and of the "expedition fees" which they not infrequently brought him.

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CHAPTER XXIX

PAULINE always looked upon the Sunday following that Saturday afternoon, on which the Professor had paid his successful visit to Mr. Festus le Touzel, as the last which was marked by any of that sort of confidential comradeship which had characterised her relations with her father before the trouble began. She knew nothing about the visit, of course, and had had no reason to anticipate such a glowing aftermath to recent events. But, like a sensible girl, she eschewed idle speculation on the causes of things, and set herself to enjoy the promise and the day.

The Professor appeared to rise an infant reborn on this gracious and gratifying morning. The storm of two nights before had been succeeded by a calm so super-normal, that the discovery that the poulterer had not delivered the Sabbath sausages, and that the ordinary un-elect rasher must suffice for the professorial breakfast, might no more than momentarily ruffle its surface. This was a test, indeed, the significance of which can nowhere be estimated at its value outside the orthodox British household. It is impossible to say what has made the saveloy holy. But that it ranks with the top-hat and hymn-book as a necessary observance of the day is certain. Perhaps it is an anti-Semitic symbol.

The sausageless Professor, after one irrepressible outburst, sat down to munch his bacon with placid

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resignation. Pauline observed him with an astonished relief. She had expected a scene, and his equanimity confounded her. He did not address her much during the meal, but the beaming abstraction of his countenance spoke volumes of peace and goodwill.

When he was done, he rose and paced softly in his old frayed slippers about the room. Once, coming behind her as she sat, he paused and let his hand fall kindly, almost timidly, on her shoulder.

"Pussy," he said, "do you remember how we used to wish for the little swineherd's pot, that could tell one, if only one held one's finger in the smoke, what every single one of one's neighbours was having for dinner?"

She did not stir.

"Yes, dear," she said softly. "Soup and pancakes for this, and hasty pudding and cutlets for the other. I remember."

He giggled lightly, and pacing to and fro again, again came to a stop.

"It would be fun, wouldn't it?" he said—"and the rattle that swung out all the tunes and waltzes in the world. With such pretty little talismans, how one could have the foibles of one's acquaintances at one's mercy!"

"The swineherd only mocked the Princess's vanity with such toys, you know, dear," she answered. "I think, nowadays, I should prefer a charm that showed me how to do people good rather than mischief."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and went to his pacing again. "To do good, yes—to take the thorns out of the little limping feet."

Her eyes filled with tears. What was this wonderful new tenderness? Suddenly he was addressing her again—hurriedly, nervously.

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"The young man, Pussy—your young man, you know—is he doing anything towards improving his worldly circumstances?"

She looked up at him breathlessly an instant.

"What do you mean, please, papa?"

"Towards making himself, in short, worthy of you?"

"It is *we* who are *his* debtors, papa."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. And if he were to ask me at this moment, poor and friendless as he is, to give myself to him, I should go, and thank him for being satisfied with so small a payment."

"And leave me? Well, you know best, of course."

"But he won't ask me, because he is above us all in worth and honour. And in the meantime he is doing his utmost, and has set up a practice on his own account."

She thought she had ended the harmony now—had struck "the little rift within the lute" that should jangle all again into discord. She would not, in her brave loyalty, keep the words unuttered nevertheless. But, to her surprise, her defiance evoked no response. Her father appeared to fall into a profound reverie.

"I believe he *is* a worthy young man," he said presently, as if to himself—"a victim, only, of very untoward circumstances. It would be a pleasure, and a duty, to reinstate him in the good opinion of the world. But these are sentimental considerations, and quite outside the practical ones of eligibility. Conceive him what he is, Pussy, and yourself the daughter of a millionaire?"

"That would make no difference."

"Not to him? It is not honourable or worthy to live dependent on one's wife."

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"Then I would give him all my money."

"O, no you wouldn't! I should see to that."

"Papa, why are you talking this nonsense? Are you likely to come into a fortune?"

"It interests me to consider such contingencies, that's all."

"O! if that's all. I think he will be rich first."

"Why do you? Now, why?"

"You haven't shown much capacity up to now."

"Capacity's nothing to do with it, young lady. It's luck that arranges these things."

"Well, you haven't been very lucky, either."

"The more reason for my chance coming. It's due at some time in one's life."

He turned away, humming, as saucy and frolicsome as a boy; but soon lapsed into luminous deeps of oblivion, from which he never wholly emerged during the rest of the day.

Early in the afternoon Roger arrived, according to custom, to take his Amaryllis for a walk. The girl, going softly into her father's study to waft him a dutiful goodbye, found him so engrossed over his desk that she could not attract his attention. She came up behind him, with some recovery to the old petted confidence, and peeped over his shoulder. He was reading from a book; or at least abstractedly pondering the substance of what he had been reading. She caught the left headline of the text. It was "Notable Swindlers of all Ages"—the work, the horrible thing, which she had learned to associate with all this trouble. It gave her a little shock to see him so absorbed in its study. The shadow of a new portent seemed to cross her brightened sky.

A little green shagreen-covered note-book lay open at the Professor's right hand. His left held a frag-

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ment of mottled inscribed parchment, which he seemed to be comparing or collating with the text of the printed page. Suddenly he emitted such a sigh of satisfaction as a thirsty man vents at the close of a long draught, and, dropping his hands on the table, threw himself back in his chair.

"The wrong house," he murmured. "Of course—it's as plain now as a pike-staff. What a blind idiot! and I might never have recognised my error, if luck hadn't given me back my own. That John Welby! Accurate enough for a priest, I suppose; but—but!"

He sank anew into deep waters of oblivion. Pauline, with the feeling of guilt of one who had listened unwitting to a confidence not meant for her, took her opportunity to steal tiptoe from the room.

"Papa is in such a curiously quiet mood to-day," she said, out in the street presently; "and, O, Roger! after the tempest of two nights ago!"

She told him all about it—that howling *danse macabre* among the broken windows; the frenzy, the fury, the sullen, boding atmosphere which had succeeded; and then, this morning, the lifted curtain and the calm. Fate had wrought between these two something more than love's usual confederacy. They were steadfast and confidential friends as well as turtle-doves. There was so much that was practical in their young lives to be faced and discussed. Pauline, at least, hid nothing from her lover.

Roger positively laughed.

"Really, Paulie," said he, "your respected parent's eccentricities are beyond reason. Old window-frames, were they? What did he expect to get out of them?"

"I don't know," she said. "They had diamond panes."

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He patted her on the back.

"Smart girl," said he. "But diamond panes seem to result in diamond pains and penalties."

"Don't you mean direful?" said she.

"I daresay," he answered. "But in any case he appears to have put his foot in it."

"Both feet," she said. "You should have seen the room; it was a sight. It makes the calm of to-day positively inexplicable."

"Something has happened in the atmosphere," said Roger. "I think Wells's green comet must have struck us during the night. An extraordinary change seems to have taken place in my friend, too, this morning."

He paused. Pauline was silent.

"O! you are a inveterate little bigot," he said. "But I think even you would be struck by his genuineness to-day. I have never known him so earnest, and so understanding, and so quiet. He said a good woman's eyes were Love's breviary, Paulie."

"Did he? I daresay it means something. But anyhow I'm glad that the atmosphere *is* so beautiful, Roger dear. What does it forebode for us? Such things seem whispering in my ears!"

Alas! "Hope told a flattering tale." This rejuvenation of loving-kindness was only to make appear more mortal the recoil, when it came, upon darkness and dismay, from which, indeed, there was to be no second rally. The Indian summer burned itself out in two brief, passionate days.

On the Monday evening Pauline, all happy and emotional in her new confidence, ran to greet her father returned from business. She switched up the light in the hall, and, lo! a malignant demon flashed and leapt into being before her. Her heart sank as she

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regarded him; then she went bravely forward to help him off with his coat. He rejected her help furiously.

"May his next lie stick in his throat till it suffocates him!" he hissed in her ear.

"Papa!" she faltered, retreating a step. "What do you mean? Whose throat?"

"Your lover's," he said. He could hardly articulate in his violence. He wrenched off his shabby garment, eyeing her malevolently the while. "Be rich before me, will he?" he snarled. "I understand—all in a conspiracy against me, even my daughter."

"I don't know what you mean," she gasped.

"Don't you?" he retorted. "Bah! liars and tricksters! But I'll be even with the lot of you."

He turned from her, and retreated, mouthing, into his den. There, shutting himself in, he stood fermenting wickedness in the dark.

"Out-manœuvred and forestalled," the devil raged in him. "No more diplomacy; no more temporising; but to strike swift and deadly for my own. What will he do with it? I shall know soon enough. And then!"

Some madness possessed him, warping his moral vision beyond cure. He was never again to recover his reason in its soundness. Nor was he ever to recover the filial trust and devotion which he had wantonly foregone. Pauline lay dry-eyed on her pillow that night.

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CHAPTER XXX

A YOUNG lady leaned over the parapet of the Serpentine bridge, abstractedly pondering the ducks in the water below. She was a very pretty young lady, of a figure verging on a fruit-like amplitude, as if she had ripened on a sunny wall, and the most beseeching of gray eyes. But there was something in her expression a little out of tune with the joyousness of this gay spring Sunday. The wistful melancholy of it certainly found no justification in the splashing and preening of the ducks, in the fresh fragrance of the hawthorns along the water-side, in the sparkling of the sun on all the holiday panorama of life about her. It suggested something of weariness and unfulfilment, where all else was fulfilled and overbrimming. Yet she was an attractive enough vision to excite plentiful comment among the passers-by.

"Did you see?" observed one young exquisite to another; "a very Hebe till she walked; and then by George! she limped!"

The remark was overheard by a smart young gentleman coming from the opposite direction, and it made him bite his lip with a sudden frown. He came up to Pauline the next instant, and greeted her fondly enough, but with a little self-defensive stiffness. The exquisite, looking back, shrugged his shoulders with a swift comprehension.

"O! it's all right," he said; "an assignation.

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Well, I wouldn't mind the limp myself if I could evoke that smile."

"I'm a bit late, I know," said Roger. "Are you tired, dear?"

He had sprouted into something of the exquisite himself, but after a manly pattern. His frock-coat fitted to a fold; his trousers displayed the line of beauty; his gloves and glossy hat were of the latest mode. Everything about him, however, exhibited the formal gentlemanly taste—style without display; and with his bright hair and athletic figure he looked a very pretty fellow indeed. Pauline was justly proud of him, and, in the most material sense, of the vindication of her choice which his present state of prosperity illustrated. It brought them nearer together, too, in a way that it was a rapture and a fear to consider. Mr. Mandrake's eligibility was no longer in question. These few months had wrought all that difference. They had made him popular and affluent. It was not his worldly circumstances that stood in the way of an alliance, but a moral sentiment, which urgency might or might not blow to smithereens at a moment's notice.

She gave a little sigh, half burdened, half happy.

"I am, just a bit," she said. "Let's go and sit down."

They sought an empty seat, out of the track of the more popular promenades, and she dropped into it with a breath of relief. He felt sorry, but a little grieved.

"I can't quite guarantee my own punctuality in these days, you know," he said. "It was different when I had nothing to do."

"Yes, I know, dear," she answered. "I wasn't complaining."

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He knew that. He knew that it was his own heart appealing to his conscience; but one's conscience, like Mr. Job Trotter in response to Mr. Weller's challenge, has a way of looking everywhere for the source of the voice addressing it, saving only and always in the obvious direction.

"Poor little girl!" he said, with a quick impulse to remorse. "I'm afraid you're having a pretty bad time of it; aren't you?"

"It's not, perhaps, what you might call exhilarating," she answered.

He touched her hand caressingly.

"Has he ever referred to me again, Paulie?"

"Not since the day he discovered that you and Mr. le Touzel had left your old rooms—that awful day."

"You haven't told him where we went?"

"How could I, when I don't know myself?"

"But he has asked you?"

She was silent, until he repeated his question; and then she answered with evident reluctance.

"He has asked me, Roger; but he'll believe nothing that I say. Perhaps it does seem funny that I shouldn't know."

"You must trust me, darling. I have my reasons. He made the past, you know, that I have to detach myself from."

"Yes, I know. But it's no good pleading that to him. He thinks—he appears to—that we are all in a conspiracy against him; and he treats me——"

She broke off abruptly. The young man squared his jaw.

"Go on," he insisted. "How does he treat you?"

"Roger," she cried, suddenly and irresistibly, "I'm frightened."

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He was very much concerned.

"Hush!" he said. "Don't give way."

"No," she answered—"no. I'm not going to shame you. But this malignancy towards me—it's horrible. And to remember what we used to be to one another!"

"I believe he's mad," said the young man.

She gave a little tremulous sigh—it was like the flutter of a scorched moth—and ended it on a "Heigh-ho!"

"There, don't mind my fancies," she said. "Only life isn't all beer and skittles at present, or whatever their equivalent is with women—lemonade and 'hops,' I suppose."

"Paulie," he said, "make up your mind, and leave him, and come and marry me offhand."

She gasped, as if he had suddenly and physically *pressed* her; then sank back, smiling, with shut eyes.

"Roger!" she murmured. "*What* a suggestion!"

"It's a very reasonable one," he said.

"No," she answered, coming erect. "It's very strong and sweet of you, Hodgkin dear; but I mustn't burn my boats—not just yet. Perhaps the old kindness and sanity will return. Are you still getting on very well?"

"By leaps and bounds," he answered. "There's no longer that objection."

"It's come to be a secondary one with him, I'm afraid. But what the real one is I know no more than you. It's a shame," she said, "that we should always stand in the way of your career. You ought to marry—every doctor ought."

"Yes, Paulie," he said. "I believe that's true."

"I'm only a drag upon your wheel of fortune," she said low, flushing a little, and bending forward to dig

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at the gravel with her parasol. "Why don't you make an end of it, Roger, and go away, and seek a wife elsewhere? With your looks and position you might choose among the best."

He looked at her, very generously and kindly.

"What nonsense you are talking, Paulie! I might hunt the world round, and never find such another Pauline."

"The next might walk properly on her two feet."

"Now, do you know what Festus said of that? 'You foolish Roger, not to know that it's the little crack in the cherry that proves its sweetness!'"

"Why did he call you 'foolish Roger'?"

"Why? O!——"

He broke off abruptly, and raised his hat to a very tall and stylish young lady who went past at the moment with her father—an orthodox but rheumy-eyed old citizen in lilac kid gloves and with a gardenia in his buttonhole. The girl acknowledged the salutation, with a charming smile for the gentleman, and an expressive but scarce perceptible shrug for his company. A little interval of silence followed.

"So Clara Lovejoy condescends to notice you again?" said Miss Urchin.

He answered rather sharply.

"I don't know what you mean by condescends. She has been to visit me professionally, that's all."

"O!"

"What do you mean by that 'O!' Pauline?"

"Nothing, dear. It only seems funny that she should know what I don't know."

"Well, what's that?"

"Where you practice—nothing more."

"I should think not. You can ask her, if you want to find out."

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"That's unkind, Roger dear."

He did not answer her. There was something, it was obvious, that was irritating him. It was a thought that jarred upon his ideals. Perhaps these have a way of becoming more exacting with prosperity. Certainly there were beautiful maidens in the world who did not limp. Still, his soul, though masculine, was a very loyal and honest one. We must not do him an injustice. He put his trouble before his friend that night.

"It *is* a flaw, Festus; there's no denying it; and it's getting worse. She would be just perfect without it. I wish to Heaven you could see her."

"Don't see how it can be done, my boy, without revealing all to the Professor."

"He *must* learn, sooner or later, that we're working in harness."

"Yes."

"What does it matter if he does?"

"It would matter—to me, I'm thinking."

"O! I mustn't ask your secret, I know."

"Better without it, Roger; it's a dangerous one. I told you I was a thought-reader. Be content to work and profit on that."

"I suppose I must; but it seems hard that she should be the only one excluded from our benefactions."

"So it is. I see only one way out of it."

"What's that?"

"Marry her, my boy, and cut the St. Peter's Square connexion."

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CHAPTER XXXI

THERE was a good deal of hat, and very little waist, about Clara Lovejoy; there was much more hair than brain. She was notorious for her "style," and never so much as when it hinted the most obscurely the human form. The nearer she could approach the ideal of the costumiers' illustrated catalogues, the greater the envy she evoked among her sisters of fashion: the further she departed in suggestion from the lines of nature, the more lively waxed the chorus of feminine jealousy. There are two sorts of style; but Clara's was the one that you, if you were a woman, found it hardest to get over. It is not given to all to affect such a triumphant travesty of their sex. "Know thyself," said the old Greek proverb; but then the Greeks had never conceived the exquisite art of a Pilotel. It is impossible for a woman to know herself in that sort of disguise. It lures her into quite a number of fantastic delusions.

The most notable of Clara's was the conviction that the jealousy of the one sex spelt the admiration of the other. She attributed both to her conquering charms. The vitality of such a belief is obvious. The more she was envied, the more she was convinced of her irresistibility. No man, she believed, but could be induced to respond to her capricious beckoning. Hence her insolent self-confidence in throwing her glove to Mr. Roger Mandrake, even in the face of his

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presumptive possession by another. She had little doubt but that he would stoop to pick it up.

Clara, as a matter of fact, had always counted Roger of her court. His youth, his personal attractions and excellence as a dancer had necessarily ensured him a place there. Even that awkward little affair before the magistrate had shaken his credit with her only in so far as its sequel was associated with what she chose to consider a certain treason to herself; otherwise her own moral principles were hardly so sensitive as to take alarm at it. But that he should look for, and find, sympathy in the daughter of his persecutor—that limping lame duck of a creature—there was the surprise. Only a languid one, it is true, so long as Fortune frowned upon the poor little shoddy romance; but——

Clara, all of a sudden, became conscious of a change in the morale of that romance. It was like a stunted, atrophied plant whose roots had penetrated at last to life-giving soil, and were drinking in great gulps of vitality. Somehow—she could not tell in what way exactly—it appeared to be holding up its head; to be waxing fat, like Jeshurun, and kicking. It was not only that its habiliments were new and glossy; the atmosphere it exhaled was one of confident prosperity. That put an entirely different complexion on affairs. The lame duck had been welcome to Mr. Mandrake poor and discredited. To Mr. Mandrake, reinstated and flourishing, she, Clara, must think of asserting her prescriptive claim. And one day she found the opportunity she sought.

It came quite unexpectedly, and from an astonishing direction. She understood in a moment the source of the young man's affluence—for it amounted to no less. He was building up, or at least laying the

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foundations of, an incalculable fortune. There was that substantial recommendation to add at last to his many personal claims on her regard. Sometimes, in these days, a little qualm as to the point to which it was safe to stretch the caprice of spinsterhood, to linger out the business of matrimonial selection, would strike her with a sudden sickness. How much older was she already than that Pauline? A detestable thought. She decided that she would net the young doctor, without any further sport of casting and playing. The game was grown too serious for the risk. She developed an obstinate case of neurasthenia, and visited Wigmore Street as often as she could secure an appointment.

One day she was on her way there, when she and Pauline happened to enter an omnibus together at Notting Hill Gate. There was no evading some conventional courtesy under the circumstances; and they exchanged a few commonplace remarks. Then Miss Lovejoy, on one of those psychologic impulses which are remote from the understanding of men, decided to make herself offensive to Miss Urchin, for the principal reason that Miss Urchin was looking her best.

"I've been so very sorry of late," she said, "to observe how your lameness has grown upon you, and how disfiguring it has become. I suppose it was beyond even the great Torcello's art."

"Very likely," said Pauline. "Who is the great Torcello?"

Miss Lovejoy uttered an ejaculation, and lifted incredulous eyebrows.

"You're joking, of course."

"I'm not."

"Torcello! You've not heard of Torcello?"

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"No."

"Not the wonderful mystic, the mind-reader, the Remedialist?"

"I've never heard his name, so far as I know."

"What, not in connexion——"

Miss Lovejoy checked herself and sat wondering. A sudden sense of astonished gratification was thrilling her veins. Was it really possible that this girl did not know? There must be a very momentous gap in her and Mr. Mandrake's confidences, that being the case. Why, she, Clara herself, was more *au fait* with his concerns, then, than this presumed possessor of his confidence and affections! What did it mean? All of a sudden she jumped to a conclusion. Mr. Mandrake had certainly associated himself with an order of quack-salvery which was not in general regarded by the law with indulgence. No doubt he had no great desire that a certain damaging witness to his character should identify him with that business. It was not to his interest that Mr. Urchin should be informed of its nature (it was an open secret, indeed, that the young man's suit of his daughter found no favour in the Professorial eyes), and therein, likely enough, was to be discovered the explanation of the affair.

The reflection left Miss Lovejoy jubilant. It argued her not only on exceptional terms of intimacy with the object of her pursuit, but possessed of a particular hold over him, should he prove recalcitrant. She could threaten to expose him to the Professor. She gave a little superior laugh.

"Well!" she interrupted herself—"you do astonish me. Never heard of Torcello! You are quite behind the times; but, there, I suppose, with your lameness, you have a difficulty in keeping up with them."

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Pauline did not answer. It was significant of her aching spirit that her characteristically ready tongue could find no retort to this impertinence. But Clara did not at all wish to pursue the subject, and they parted presently without any further reference to it.

Miss Lovejoy made her way to the purple door in Wigmore Street.

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CHAPTER XXXII

ROGER, in his capacity of qualified jackal to the great show lion of Wigmore Street, had his private patients, many and profitable. Relegated to him in the first instance from the Wizard's sanctum below, they remained on his hands for specialised treatment, founded on a sure root knowledge of their ailments, and the fees thus gained from them represented his share in the yieldings of the partnership. Within the first few months of the venture he could already boast a handsome balance at his bankers. He was a clever young fellow, precocious in pathology and a skilful operator for his years; but to have a consulting seer at one's back is certainly an advantage and education beyond the opportunity of most practitioners. Still, it could be well said of him that he took no advantage of his exceptional endowments to scamp his duties, but studied his every case earnestly and conscientiously on its clearly defined merits.

One day Miss Clara Lovejoy was sent up to him, with a message from below. His discomfort thereat was as great as was her astonishment, and not the less because of the nature of the esoteric communication which had preceded her, and which had run, roughly, on these lines:—

"Diagnose tight lacing and organic displacement. But an irreclaimable subject. A vain and vicious nature. Brought here mostly by curiosity, and the

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desire to do the fashionable thing. You would do well to beware of her."

And on that information the confused young man had to order his conduct.

But Clara, after she had mastered her first surprise, took her own case in hand. She laughed at the pronouncements of wisdom, delicately as they were hinted by proxy. They only served to convince her, she said, of the purely practical character of the great Torcello's gifts. Ailments which lay nearer to the psychology of the emotions were evidently beyond his understanding. He might straighten limbs, remove the blind specks from eyes, retighten the sensitive drums of hearing; the complaints incidental to a feeling heart he could not fathom.

Very prettily, then, and with a wan smile, she inserted two beautifully gloved fingers under her waistband.

"See here," she said, "my frock is positively bagging on me."

Mr. Mandrake, with some bashfulness, asked her for her symptoms.

She sat down languidly, and thrust out an ineffable little foot. He could not fail to notice it, or the general conventional shapeliness of the figure to which it gave a sort of fine finishing-point.

"From my head to my toes," she said, "I am all perfectly natural. How can you doubt it? Have we not danced together, Mr. Mandrake; and do you ever remember my breath or my feet failing me?"

"No, indeed," said Roger gratefully. "You dance like a sylph, Miss Lovejoy."

"That is because one's feet keep time to one's heart when one has a sympathetic partner," answered Clara. "But supposing one's heart were beating all out of place, what sort of time would one keep?

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She would not wait for a retort; but led him on, through a manner of engaging interest, to speak about himself and his affairs. Not the best of men is adamant to that appeal, especially when emphasised by soft and wistful eyes. He told her frankly enough that, beyond acting as resident doctor in the establishment, he knew no more than the world at large of the nature of Torcello's power. That was to cut short her little pointed probings of him.

"He sees somehow," said he, "and localises the mischief; and though he can't always cure it, in no single instance have I known him diagnose wrong."

"O, yes! in one instance, I think," was the arch response.

"You are better informed than I am," said Roger.

She fixed him with her eyes. Her smile was plaintive with reproach.

"You are really very ungallant after my assurance, Mr. Mandrake," she said. "But perhaps you have forgotten, or have learned to take your measurements of nature from an ampler model."

The young doctor flushed a little. There was certainly nothing of this graceful, willowy buoyancy about Pauline. A touch of it might even be an improvement. But, then—"to paint the lily"! He reflected, with a glow of kindness, upon the probable nature of any report Torcello might have sent up about *her*. The thought brought to his lips a smile, which, being directed unconsciously towards Miss Lovejoy, was accounted by that young lady to the credit of her irresistibility. She believed she had suggested a telling contrast—her own pretty wasp-like waist against Pauline's natural isthmus. She sighed and looked her prettiest.

"Sentiment is a very healing drug in some cases,"

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said Mr. Mandrake sententiously; "only it doesn't figure in the pharmacopœia. I'm afraid, in my professional capacity, I must think more of what waists bound than of what they measure."

"Very well," she said; "I daresay it is the same thing. There must be something to account for my loosened frocks."

"I am to ignore Torcello altogether, then?"

"You can satisfy yourself, if you wish."

"Since when do you date these symptoms."

"What symptoms?"

"This marasmus—this unaccountable wasting, and loss of appetite and vitality?"

She hung her head, answering in a low voice—

"It was about the time, I think—you were—were made the victim of that horrible accusation."

The young man winced, and set his teeth.

"O, indeed!" he said.

"Yes," she went on. "I am always painfully affected by any story of injustice or unmerited suffering; and when, as in this case, it was a dear friend——"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted her. "Repudiating, then, this libel on the part of Torcello, I diagnose your case as one of scorbutus."

"O, horrible!" she murmured. "An affection of the heart, is it?"

"No," he answered; "of the blood."

"Is it incurable, Mr. Mandrake? But I feel it is."

"Not at all. It only necessitates some changed conditions."

"Ah, yes!" she answered, with a pathetic smile—"changed conditions indeed! If only we women could give effect to the whisperings of our hearts instead of having to sit silent in our places in the

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market, and wait for the poor chance of the right man understanding and speaking. I hardly know what I mean; only of late I have been dimly conscious of such a void and aching desire in myself—for what, I wonder?"

"For fresh vegetables," said Roger. "Not a doubt about it."

"I hate all vegetables," she answered passionately; "especially turnips."

"I don't recommend them," answered the young man. "Cabbages would be better."

"Mr. Mandrake," she said, "you are insulting me."

"How can you think it?" he answered. "If you resent my advice, you can find plenty of others willing to give you more congenial."

"No," she said, beginning to sob. "I was wrong. Go on."

"Very well," he said. "Your symptoms will be marked by an increasing debility, pallor, breathlessness. Your teeth will probably fall out, and you will develop a brawny hardness of various parts, with a tendency——"

She started to her feet, clutching her handkerchief like a dagger.

"Please to hold your tongue," she said. "I will confess that Torcello was right. I do lace a little closely."

"Ah!" said Roger. "Then now we will start afresh."

She came several times after that. It was a little unfortunate that the fib unfibbed gave their consultations something the complexion of that close understanding which exists between penitent and confessor. Clara was like a trusting child with her young doctor. She hung with pleading eyes and parted lips upon his

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words. That little naughtiness had given her the opportunity to play the part of submission with an alluring charm. She calculated her effects and his probable profits with admirable nicety. She was only mistaken about one thing—that he was in the least taken in by her posturing.

"She's making almost open love to me at last, Festus," said he. "What shall I do?"

"I warned you," answered the little man. "You'll have to cut out that barbed hook, since you've chosen to be trifling with the bait."

The next day was the day on which Clara encountered Pauline in the omnibus. The information accorded her brought her to the resolve to bring matters to a crisis. But unfortunately Roger had come to a like determination. His examination was brief, formal, and unsympathetic.

"I mustn't pretend that it won't be waste of time your visiting me any more," he said, at the end. "You have only to be constant to my directions to remain perfectly well."

She was thunderstruck.

"You don't want to see me any more!" she exclaimed. Until this moment she had been convinced of the steady tightening of her snares about him.

"Professionally," he began.

"I am not speaking of professionally," she answered with a gulp.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have never attached any other meaning or condition to these visits. If you have been led into that error, as your words would seem to imply, their cessation becomes a peremptory necessity. You can hardly be ignorant, I am sure, of my engagement."

She stood perfectly still; the colour flushed and

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faded and flushed and faded in her cheek. Presently she forced a little incredulous laugh.

"I don't know, I can't pretend to guess, what you are suggesting, Mr. Mandrake," she said. "The implication seems so monstrously presumptuous, that I can hardly believe it, even from you. That I—*I* should be supposed guilty of a tenderness towards a semi-convicted thief——"

He took three steps to the door, opened it, and beckoned her peremptorily forth.

"I think you had better go at once," he said.

She drew her skirts from contact with him as she passed out.

"I shall not forget this most gratuitous insult," she said, with a smile, and went frigidly down the stairs.

A few evenings later she *happened* to run across Professor Urchin as he was returning from business. The Director of the Antiquities Department, as he slouched along Ladbroke Grove, his hands wrestling together behind his back, his lips ejaculating soft violences, a baleful scowl on his face, looked a particularly unapproachable figure. But Clara had the confidence of her qualities so imbued in her, that even such a mortification as she had suffered of late was unable to shake it. Moreover, the Professor, she knew perfectly well, had a weakness for a pretty face. She accosted, and fell into step with him.

"Mr. Urchin," she said, "why on earth don't you get Torcello to pronounce upon Pauline's lameness? I'm sure it's increasing upon her."

He grunted hideously, the old hog.

"Don't know who you mean."

"What!" she cried, with affected astonishment, "you haven't heard of Torcello!"

"No," he snarled. "Don't worry me with your

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ejaculations. If I asked you if you'd heard of—who shall I say?—Sharezer, for instance, would you know who I meant?"

"O!" cried Miss Lovejoy; "but all London's been wild for ever such a time about Torcello. He effects the most wonderful cures."

"Eh! what?"

The Professor checked his pace, and glanced at the girl a little breathless.

"What do you mean?" he said. "Who is he?"

"Nobody knows," she answered. "He was just there, suddenly, in Wigmore Street, curing everybody, and——"

The Professor stumbled, and recovered himself.

"And what?" he said.

"I've been to him—for fun," she answered; "and such a curious thing, do you know, Mr. Urchin. That—but I don't think I must tell you. It isn't my secret at all. Only I fancy, if you do take Pauline there, you'll find a surprise awaiting you. It's pleasant, anyhow, to find people, whom one has thought rather hopeless, capable of reforming. But you'll see for yourself."

He did not utter another word, until suddenly and sharply he asked her for the address in Wigmore Street.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

"EVER heard of Torcello?"

Professor Urchin, scowling up from his bacon, asked, or snarled, the question of his daughter. It was one of the very few he vouchsafed her in these days. The two were quite fallen apart. He seemed to have come, even, to grudge her board and lodging in his house. That he had formed great matrimonial plans for her, and that her wicked perversity had defeated them all, was the text of his grievance. She had chosen to shift for herself—to join the ranks of his enemies—to become a renegade from filial piety. So he elected to regard the matter. Very well; he would retort, as, in nature, the parent bird was wont to retort on its estranged nestling, by holding his private feeding-ground against her hungry encroachments. She should be made to feel herself an unwelcome stranger in that prescriptive home.

Pauline's breath caught in a little spasm, as she raised and dropped her eyelids. It was become even an unusual thing for her father to address her at all.

"I have just heard him mentioned," she answered.

He grunted—a particularly cross and unlovely old person.

"How mentioned? Can't you say what you mean!"

"As a universal healer—a Remedialist, I think the word was," she said.

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He shot a second baleful glance across the table.

"I wonder if he could heal you?" he questioned sourly.

"I will go to him, papa, if you wish it," she answered.

"I daresay," he said. "And without the least consideration for the tax on my pocket."

"If he *were* able to do me good," she answered steadily, "the outlay, perhaps, might prove an economy in the long run."

"O, indeed! and how, please?"

"If he could make me fit somehow to earn my own living."

He sneered out a detestable little laugh.

"To earn your own living—*you!* Is your Mr. Mandrake, then, beginning to shy at the prospect of a lame wife?"

"Papa!"

He was deaf to the anguish in her voice.

"Why, it's natural enough," he said. "The young gentleman's worldly circumstances are improving, as I understand. His eyes may be opening to the awkwardness of the clog he's fastened about his own ankle. He could run faster in harness with a sound-footed partner."

She was on her feet, very pale and breathing quickly.

"Papa!" she said again; and seemed unable to say more.

"A fine young bloodhorse like that," he continued brutally. "He could pick and choose of the best. But there's one consolation. The better he prospers, the more substantial our claim on him when it comes to an action for breach of promise."

She bit her quivering lip.

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"It is not true," she said. "And, if it were, I would die before I so shamed my love."

He rose, wiping his lips, with an evil chuckle.

"Then it must be to earn your own living, indeed," he said. "These fancy empirics ask fancy fees; but—in view of that same economy——"

He threw down his table-napkin roughly, and turned to her.

"You are to be waiting for me in Wigmore Street at half-past one o'clock," he said; "and we will see if this Torcello can patch you up for the market. Whether he mends you for that, or for your love's precious handling, is all one to me, so long as he can put a period to *our* partnership. Do you hear?"

She did not answer, and he left her.

At one-thirty the massive and sombrely gorgeous porter in Wigmore Street opened the purple door to a loud and truculent knock. Having done which he was struck as if petrified.

The Professor and Miss Pauline stood on the step outside. The spectacles of the former might have been scaled from the eyes of a dead Medusa. They appeared, in their concentrated stare, to be turning the porter into stone.

"O!" said the Professor pleasantly, emitting a sigh as at the end of a draught of something oddly stimulating. "It's you, Johnson, is it? I wonder why, now?"

The ex-detective came to his wits with a heave. Why should he fear this man any longer? It had only appeared demoralising in the first shock of things.

The Professor stepped into the hall, followed by his daughter. Johnson found his voice, if rather thickly.

"Do you want an appointment, sir?"

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His old master turned upon him.

"So you've found a new place, Johnson; and without any question of references, it appears?"

"My present head, sir," said the man, "can afford to do without 'em. *He*, sir, can look into a man, and appreciate him at his proper worth."

"Very useful indeed," answered the Professor. "But it isn't given to us all to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. How did you come to hear of him, now?"

The man put the question doggedly by.

"I'll enter your appointment, if you please, sir," he said, shutting the door and moving to the table. The Professor touched his arm.

"Now will do," he said.

"Out of the question, sir," answered Johnson.

"O! I think not," said the Professor. "Time, you know, my good fellow, is everything to me. I'm sure your master wouldn't want to risk the loss of a prospective patient for the lack of a little consideration. I can't come again. Try, now, if he won't consent to see me without an appointment."

The ex-detective considered. Apart from his own personal quarrel with this man, apart from his own fear and hatred of him, there was something, he knew, intimately associated in his affairs with the affairs of the two gentlemen whom he served. He might be designing them some evil. Would it not be well, then, to bring his mind subject to the penetrating inquisition of the one who could read all minds? He decided on the instant that it would be.

"Very well, sir," he said. "If you and the young lady will step into this room, I will see what can be done."

Pauline, pale and quiet, shrunk from the curious

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scrutiny of the other waiting patients; but the Professor, in the plenitude of his contempt, sat and Gorgonised them all. The two, however, were not kept long waiting. After an interval of ten minutes or so Johnson himself reappeared, and whispered in the Professor's ear that the Remedialist had consented, as a great favour, to grant them a consultation at once.

The Professor rose, with an indescribable feeling in his breast. It was expectation, but not apprehension—a thrill without a qualm. It might have been explained as a sort of caustic bracing of his nerves. There was nothing pusillanimous in his nature, it must be admitted. Perhaps that was because he lacked those organs which accounted to Scrooge for the transparency of Marley's ghost. Intestine alarms, in short, were not possible to him. Followed by Pauline, he entered the mystic adytum, and found himself in the presence of the Remedialist.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

THE characteristic features of the great Torcello appeared on this occasion to be even beatifically emphasised, as if his spirit had risen to altitudes remoter than usual from all human understanding. Mild, meek, and insignificant as he had figured on his first introduction to Major Anstruther, his aspect of gentle transcendence was here nothing less than saintlike. His hair was sleekly apostolic; his green spectacles beamed with the quiet beneficence of the most distant stars; his voice, when he spoke, was like the voice of a ventriloquial Santa Claus calling down a chimney. For some reason, it would appear, he had an extra particular desire at this moment to let "concealment feed on his damask cheek."

That showed a quick spot of colour, nevertheless, upon the appearance of Pauline with her father. He had evidently not been prepared for the "double entry." Johnson, as a matter of fact, had omitted to mention that the Professor was accompanied by a lady. To accept the visitor in such a connexion altered the whole aspect of affairs. Who was seeking him, and for what? Well, he would soon know. He drew his heels together, and bowed with a serene affability.

"You will pardon my requesting," said he in that queer inward voice, "that, as I have stretched a point

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to accommodate you, sir, you will meet me with a reasonable brevity."

The Professor, conning the speaker, perfectly motionless, answered with an equal self-possession. He had not failed to notice that conscious flush of pink to the omniscient cheek. It seemed to afford him in some wise a clue. If he himself was no prophetical braggart, he possessed a plenitude of worldly shrewdness.

"By all means," he said. "Here"—he pulled Pauline rudely forward—"is to be the subject of your inquiry."

"Your daughter?" asked Torcello.

"Of course," answered the Professor.

There was a world of meaning in the two words. "Why," they might have implied, "affect this esoteric understanding with me? My daughter, *of course.*"

"She has been lame for years," he said. "Of late her lameness has increased upon her. I am told, sir, that you can penetrate to the causes of these cachexies or deliquiums, and suggest their remedies."

"That is perfectly true, Professor Urchin."

"Eh! what! How do you know my name?"

"It was given me by my servant."

"Humph!" growled the Professor. "Very well, sir. If you will proceed. What is your fee, may I ask?"

"Ten guineas, in all cases."

"That would be monstrous, of course, in event of failure."

"I will make it conditional on success."

"I think that is only fair. Now, sir, I am not detaining you."

He pushed the girl forward. Torcello accepted her with a smile of gentle reassurance.

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"Have no fear, my dear young lady," he said. "My method of diagnosis is as painless as it is exhaustive. See, I just place my hand on your forehead. I switch off the light a moment; I ask your father to remain during the moment without speech or movement where he stands."

"Papa!" cried the girl piteously.

"Hold your tongue!" responded the Professor harshly. "Don't you hear what he says? Remember what it means to you—to me, above all; and let him do what he wants."

"Believe me," said Torcello, "it is such an instant; so simple; and it may mean your complete restoration to health."

She shut her eyes, and resigned herself. The light went out. Some seconds of profound silence ensued. Suddenly the globe in the ceiling reflashed into radiance, and revealed the Professor, white and stealthy, crept to within a few feet of the operator. He staggered slightly, and put his hand to his eyes. Torcello stepped back a pace.

"Is this the way you obey me, sir?" he said, in a low and terrible voice.

The Professor seemed to shrink like an abject thing. He stammered when he could speak,

"I—I saw something—it was light, a violet light—I didn't know what you were doing with her—I——"

"You meant to rob me, sir."

"Ridiculous! Of what? How could I know?"

"You must leave the room, if you wish me to continue."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

Pauline, very pale, but with a new resolution in her manner, put in her word.

"Please go, papa. It will be much better."

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"How dare you! What do you mean, you unnatural creature?" stuttered the Professor.

"I was feeling so happy and confident," she said. "It seemed as if something were going down in me right to the root of the evil."

"I decline, sir, to pursue this investigation in your presence," said Torcello.

Professor Urchin, fuming but cowed, stepped to the door.

"O, very well!" he said; "I presume you will condescend to acquaint me with the result?"

"The moment I am in a position to." The ex-detective had appeared to his summons. "Show this gentleman into the waiting-room, and return with him when I ring again."

Torcello, it appeared, could combine, like March, the lion with the lamb. The Professor was extinguished but for a minute or two. He recovered himself, however, during that short interval, and came back re-envenomed like a snake who had exhausted his poison fang on an inanimate object. He scowled viciously on the Remedialist and his patient.

"Well," he said, "what stuff for my ears now? This is the method of the common charlatan. I suppose you recognise that, sir?"

"I am as indifferent to your scorn as to your treachery," said the seer. "I know how to answer to both."

"Answer to the first, then," said the Professor rudely; "and earn your fee, which is, I suppose, your first consideration."

"Do you?" said Torcello. "Well, you're wrong. My first consideration is to straighten a sweet shoot of a very crooked old stock. And if I could induce her," he added, in a sudden burst of violence, "to

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graft herself away from that same parent, I'd be after congratulating myself on a fine finish to a very pretty operation."

Professor Urchin, standing quite still, did not answer, either to retort or surrender. Only a queer smile, as of one to whom a certain clue had been vouchsafed, twitched his features.

"Well," he said presently. "Perhaps you won't mind informing me, after all, what *is* the matter with her?"

The Remedialist turned to the girl, who all this time had been standing by the table apart, white and silent.

"Listen to me, my child," he said, "for it's to you I address myself entirely. Do you recall, now, when you were a bit of a thing, stealing one of your mother's needles from a pincushion that you'd been forbidden to touch?"

She shook her head slightly.

"And pinning it into the hem of your little frock," he persisted, "and falling down and driving it into your knee?"

"O, yes!" she said, with a faint smile. "I remember that."

"You do?" he said. "Naughty panic-struck little thief that you were! The needle broke off half-way—didn't it, now?"

"Yes, sir," she answered him fearfully.

"And you found the eye part; but the rest, the sharp point of it, remained in your pretty knee?"

"It didn't hurt," she murmured.

"No," said the seer; "it didn't hurt; and why? Because it had entered the painless part which every schoolboy knows—the part which the nerve system has left somehow isolated, like a little hillock in a

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flood. But it didn't remain there for ever. In the course of the years it has worked its way down until it has entered a more vital region, where it paralyses the nerves of motion, and will come to invalidate them altogether unless removed in time."

Pauline, as he spoke, stood regarding him with wide eyes of terror. Her father turned upon her with a quick, sharp movement.

"You recall it?" he said.

"Yes," she whispered—"quite clearly, now that he mentions it."

The Professor whisked about again.

"An operation?" he demanded.

"Quite a simple one."

"Here? Can it be done here?"

"It could be; but——"

"But what?"

"You would insist upon being present at it, I suppose?"

"Most certainly."

"Then I must refer you elsewhere for it."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the Professor, vicious and wiry as a wild cat, leapt upon him. But the seer had foreseen and been prepared. Springing to one side, and touching a bell in the act, he left the other to stagger and fall forward on his hands and knees, in a position neither advantageous nor graceful. Pauline uttered a wild and piteous cry, and on its echo there came a swish and sigh from the wall, and a footstep at the door. The Professor gathered himself together and rose. The company, it appeared, had been supplemented all in a moment by a couple of figures—that of Johnson on the one side, of Mr. Roger Mandrake on the other. The situation was so dramatically complete that it might

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have been rehearsed. Indeed, as conceived apart from himself and Pauline, the Professor was convinced that it had been. He stood on his feet, a little bruised and dusty, and took it all in with a wicked sneer.

"I see," he said, "I see—a fully organised conspiracy—I see and understand." He paused a moment. "Thieves and swindlers, all of you!" he roared suddenly; "but I'll prove my right to my own if I hang for it."

He turned and made for the door. Pauline, following him, answered with one instant only of piteous hesitation the whispered appeal of her lover. Then she too went.

"Show them out, Johnson," said his master.

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CHAPTER XXXV

MANDRAKE looked at his friend in silent dismay.

"What the thunder made you come and show yourself?" asked Festus, otherwise Torcello.

"You asked me to hold myself handy."

"Yes, to be sure. But only in case I called for you."

"Why didn't you tell me *she* was with her father?"

"Because I didn't know until they came in. Johnson, the fool, never said."

"What was it, Festus? Why did she cry out? Did you think I could remain deaf to that voice, and when it sounded in fear or trouble? I was standing ready by the lift, and it was only a touch and a step. I had to come."

"Faith, I suppose I should have foreseen the contingency. But it's no good wishing now. He'll be thinking we're all in the one league against him, Johnson included."

"What had happened? Why don't you tell me?"

"O! he'd just made a jump at me, the spalpeen. I saw he was on the prick of it, and stood prepared. I rang for Johnson—not you."

Roger exclaimed peevishly—

"This confounded mystery! If only one could gather the necessity for it? And now, I suppose, I'm in for an explanation with her."

"Why do you suppose it?"

"Didn't you observe the manner of her going?

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But I daresay it conveyed nothing to you. There's only one comfort in it all—the secrecy you imposed upon me about my connexion with you is at an end."

"O! you think that a comfort, do you? I wish I could."

"Well, you can't expect me, knowing nothing, to sympathise with you."

"I don't ask you to, for all, as it seems to me, you're profiting pretty handsomely by this same 'confounded mystery.' Anyhow, we're in the way to be thankful at last for one thing: if she's got to know about you, she's got to know, by the token, about herself. There's that much of gain to be extracted from the affair, whatever the mischief it brings."

"How do you mean, to know about herself?

"It was on her business that the two visited me, that's all.

"On her business? Festus, you don't mean——"

"Faith, but I do. It was just that question of her lameness—ostensibly, at least."

"Of her—Festus! And you——"

"Steady on, my boy! It's just a bit of a needle she broke into her knee when she was a child. It's travelled since, but the right way for an operation. A very simple one would put her right."

"Festus," said the young man gratefully, after a pause, "I was an ill-conditioned viper to be turning on the hand that warmed me. You ought to retaliate on me like the woodman."

"O! you can hold your tongue for that," answered the Irishman. "The difficulty is to get the operation done."

"Surely, now he knows, he can't be so vile——"

"Hist, now! I believe his bringing her was nothing but a pretext."

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"For what? There, I'm not aiming at your secret. I wonder what made him guess?"

"Do you? You'll not have been coming to terms, now, with that Miss Lovejoy, I suppose?"

"Terms? Do you mean to imply that she gave him the hint?"

"I warned you against her, if you'll remember. It's not impossible, I think."

"The detestable creature! Festus, you are a marvel. I must persuade Paulie to the operation on her own account."

"Yes, do."

"You dear fellow! To make her whole again—better than building me up a thousand fortunes!"

"Arrah, now! Is my wig straight? There'll be some out there cursing the Remedialist's procrastination. We must make hay while the sun shines, Roger. I foresee plenty of storm to come."

That foresight, indeed, was proof of no exceptionally prophetic quality. Either of the other parties concerned might have laid an equal claim to it. The first of the tempest, as a matter of fact, broke over Roger's devoted head on the Sunday following the day of this portentous interview.

Circumstances had obliged him of late to forego his part of *cavaliere-servente* in the weekly waiting upon his lady at St. Peter's Square. He still restricted himself loyally to these Sabbath meetings; but they had perforce come to assume the character of trysts—foregatherings in some pre-appointed rendezvous. The reason was that the mere sound of his footstep in the porch was grown to be a provocation in these days to the most unscrupulous bursts of unprofessorial language it was possible to conceive. They were instantly evoked by his ring; they swelled into

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maledictory volume with the opening of the door, as the snarling of shrill pipes answers in increase to the opening of an organ swell; they boomed upon him in a devastating diapason all the time he was waiting for his lady's appearance, and pursued the two into the street in a windy decrescendo. The ordeal, the shameless persecution, became after a time intolerable; and Pauline and her lover had taken to meeting somewhere outside by appointment.

On this particular occasion the girl, writing in a little repressed, unhappy way, had named for rendezvous, of all places, the cockney desolation of Wormwood Scrubbs. Roger, meeting her there, could not repress his dissatisfaction.

"I had a reason," she said hurriedly. "I am only a woman after all, Roger, and sensitive about appearances. I could not bear the thought of a scene anywhere where we might be recognised and put to shame."

"A scene!" he exclaimed, astonished. "Who's going to make a scene?"

"Hush!" she said. "He has grown quite rabid in the last few days—ever since——"

She shrank away, with a little gasp.

"I thought he intended to follow me," she whispered; "and here he is."

Even with her words the Professor came striding up. His spectacles glared; his coat-tails flapped behind him; there was an air about him of quite infernal malignancy.

"So this was your destination?" he thundered, addressing his daughter.

Two or three urchins, tumbling on the grass, paused in their gambols; a cook-maid, hanging upon the arm of a military gentleman in khaki, turned to hang upon

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the sequel; a blowzed lady, wheeling a perambulator, stopped the ears of a crying little boy with a cuff, and opened her own. Roger, going very white, put himself forward.

"Didn't you know it, sir?" he said. "There was no idea of concealment."

"O, indeed, sir!" said the Professor, foaming. "But perhaps *my* ideas of concealment don't fit in with those of an unconvicted thief and swindler."

"You lie!" cried Roger fiercely.

The Director of Antiquities gave a horrible sneering laugh.

"Don't I know at last with whom you are associated?" he snarled. "Make restitution, I say—make restitution, if you want me to believe you."

"I don't know what you mean," answered the young man. "I have taken nothing from you—but this." He made a quick gesture towards the poor Pauline, where she stood apart, quite overcome with shame and terror. "I don't say it was my deserts," he went on; "but you owed me some return for your false, foul accusations; and, until this moment, you have always seemed to admit it."

"Until this moment," cried the Director, "I have never realised the extent of your iniquity. To think to persist in your claim to the child of the man you have robbed!" He made a quick step forward. "Come home with me, you wretched girl!" he said.

Pauline shrank back. The furious old man raised his stick. "Char!" exclaimed the cook-maid, releasing the soldier's arm. "Don't you let him do it, Char!"

Roger, gallant and handsome, was an interesting figure in the feminine eye. Besides, this confounding of fond lovers, and the ugly Adelphi papa! The

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situation contained all the best elements of melodrama. The Paladin in khaki stepped forward.

"Drop that, old fellow!" he said.

Roger had placed himself swiftly by his love's side. The soldier barred the way beyond. Professor Urchin let his stick slowly subside.

"Run, dears," cried the cook-maid. "Char will keep him from following of you."

The advice was heartfelt, but scarcely practical. Roger smiled whitely.

"Good girl," he said. "But I have done nothing to be ashamed of."

"To lift his ungodly hand agin his own daughter, the ugly old sketch!" proclaimed the lady with the perambulator indignantly; "and," she added, "if you don't stop that crying, Johnny, I'll knock your head off."

The Professor found himself, as a popular figure, in a distinct minority. He hesitated, scowling, with an intense acrimony, on all about him.

"I might have known," he said at last. "Fools and sentimentalists! But what is one to expect when one's own child joins the conspiracy against one?"

He turned, strode a few steps, and flounced about again.

"Understand," he cried, "you—that you meet this fellow without my sanction or approval, and, if you persist, must suffer the consequences."

He showed his teeth and shook his fist in an ungovernable burst of fury, and, turning, went off across the green like an ungainly figure of doom.

Roger, with a little repressed action of reassurance, left Pauline a moment, and shook the soldier heartily by the hand.

"I'm obliged to you," he said. "You're a good

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fellow. And"—he turned—"I'm obliged to your little lady too."

"O! you're very welcome," said the girl.

"And now," said Roger—"you'll understand. It's been rather a trying scene for us both, and we should like to go away quietly. Will you see that we're let to?"

"Char!" cried the cook-maid shrilly; "stop them young imps from following."

The soldier responded—it proved a necessary precaution—with some drastic persuasion emphasised by his little swagger-cane. Roger lifted his hat to the company, and motioned Pauline to go with him.

"Thanks very much," he said. "Good-day!"

"Poor dears!" said the cook-maid, as their forms receded across the Scrubbs; and then she sighed. "What a figger for a soldier he'd make, Char!"

"Gar'n!" answered the Paladin gruffly.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

"ROGER, you must give me up."

"O! Must I?"

"This ends it, Roger dear. The shame and dishonour I seem doomed to bring on you."

"No other reason, Paulie?"

"O, yes, yes!"

"What? Parental prohibitions?"

"How can you have rallied from the horror like this, and be so light-hearted? I feel heavy enough to sink into the earth. I wish I could, and forget everything."

"Hush, little girl! You are trembling, and as white as a sheet. Let us sit down somewhere."

"O, no! I want to go on. I want to escape."

"Very well. But escape is nothing unless you can find an asylum. Paulie, you are going to marry me the very moment we can satisfy the registrar."

"Impossible."

"And then—there is another reason—I can have my poor lame darling made sound again, without asking anybody's permission but her own."

She shook her head distressfully.

"Won't you, Paulie?" he coaxed.

She was looking straight before her with wet, fixed eyes.

"How did he know, Roger?" she whispered.

"How did who know what?"

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"Your friend—about the needle?"

"I know no more than you do."

"It *was* your friend, wasn't it?" she said—"this Torcello, I mean. Papa declared he recognised him for Mr. le Touzel."

"Yes," answered Roger. "He was right."

"It was fearful," she said—"unnatural. There *must* be something wrong in it."

"Why?"

"Why?" Her eyes turned to him in inexpressible pain. "*Because* it was unnatural. Why would you never tell me the truth about your getting on so well of late—that it was because you were in partnership with him?"

"No objection in the least on my own account. It was just that *he* asked me to keep it a secret from you."

"Why from me?"

"He was afraid, I think, that it might leak through to the Professor."

"He didn't want papa to know about you?"

"About himself more, I think."

She stopped, and put an agitated hand on the young man's arm.

"There, you see! There *is* some horrible mystery in it all, Roger. You know it as well as I do."

"Indeed, I've never had a doubt, Paulie—a mystery, that is to say; I don't see where the horror comes in."

"I do, when it excites such wicked passions in an old man like my father. I wish you would dissociate yourself from it. He might believe you then."

"You forget, Paulie, I think. I owe everything to Festus, and the reverse of anything to your father. Besides, you mustn't think a power necessarily evil because it is beyond your comprehension."

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Pauline was inclined to, nevertheless, I am afraid. She was an intelligent but not in the least an intellectual girl, or one, in the matters of custom and religion, above the conventional standard. Holding by appearances, as she had admitted she did, it was not to be supposed that she would accept without suspicion and uneasiness any manifestations of the unseen. Occultism, super-normal phenomena, telepathy, clairvoyance, and all the terms and business of esoteric psychology were just the terms and business of mischief to her. They represented an absolutely unnecessary stirring up of the dust of the prescriptive order of things. The road of one's duty ran so perfectly plainly before one, if one only chose to keep to it. Star-gazing could end in nothing but bog-floundering.

"I don't say that exactly," she answered; "but only that straightforward methods have no need to make a mystery of themselves."

"Some people have abnormal gifts, without in the least knowing why or where from."

"Yes; I daresay."

"Suppose that is the case with my friend?"

"I cannot forget papa's words, Roger. I believe with all my heart and soul in you—you can never doubt that; but at least it is clear that he fancies he has been robbed of something by one of you."

"Not by me!"

"No—O, Roger! Can't you see what I mean?"

"Paulie dear; how can you believe evil of this man who, in your own case, has shown you nothing but the beneficent nature of his gift?"

"He may find it more profitable to do good with it than bad."

"You hurt me very badly by saying that."

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"Roger! I love you so. Don't I show it by renouncing you!"

"Nonsense, I tell you. I'm not going to be renounced."

"I am a very hateful influence in your life. Take yourself out of the lives of us all—mine and papa's and your friend's. It is the only way to make me happy."

"And me, you little pig-headed bigot? Does my happiness count for nothing? No, no, you child. Thank yourself for my level head. I am going to marry you and make you whole."

"By the operation?"

"Yes, the little silly, simple operation."

"Roger—I must say it. I will never, never consent to it unless you first learn from your friend the nature of his secret."

"Paulie!"

"Yes, I mean it, Roger. It is all a dark and uncanny thing to me as it stands. Why should he be given this power for good, if he is not good? I remember your words about him. You said he was not nice—not nice, perhaps, in my sense. Well, I am not a prude; but I didn't want to have anything to do with him, or to have you have anything to do with him after that. And then to find that you had associated yourself as closely with him as this—his unconscious instrument, it seems to me, Roger. If you would only find out from him to what he owes his power!"

"How can I so abuse his trust in me, Paulie?"

"Perhaps not; and, perhaps, in that case, it will be the best. Because I cannot marry you, Roger; and so you will be rid of one evil influence on your life."

"You make things very difficult for me. Is it to be

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this, then, Paulie, either my finding out or losing you?"

"O, my dear, dear love! I must say it, though it breaks my heart. Yes and yes and yes, Roger."

"I will ask him."

"Roger!"

"There! does that convince you of my love?"

"I want to cry so badly."

"Wait till you get home. Home! What is going to happen to you there?"

"Don't be afraid for me. I am not for myself any longer."

"Supposing he is violent?"

"He will not be that, dear. His methods are different."

"Poor little girl!"

"Poor! I am so happy I could sing."

"Sing. Why, you wanted to cry just now."

"Just now is such miles away in love, Roger."

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CHAPTER XXXVII

PROFESSOR URCHIN took to haunting Wigmore Street during the most of his spare moments. Rabid and sinister, the prey to an inner corrosion, perpetually stalking back and forth, perpetually pausing to take stock of the purple door, it is a wonder that his movements were not observed and his intentions questioned by the police. But perhaps, on that beat of beating hopes and fears, where men came thronging to receive their death-warrants, or, perchance, new leases for their rotten and decayed life-tenements, such spectral walkings were not uncommon enough to excite suspicion when they happened. Souls racked and rent, like the Professor, and hesitating on the verge of despair, did not come few and far between. He was permitted his visitations undisturbed.

Once, very early, he had taken his resolution in hand, and made application at the purple door. The ex-detective, faithful and imperturbable, had barred his entrance on the instant of recognition.

"Well, sir?"

"I desire to make an appointment with your master."

"Can't be done, sir."

"Why not?"

"I've my strict orders not to admit you again, sir."

"O! Perhaps you'll know what that same order, and your stubborn adherence to it, conveys to me?"

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"Shall I, sir? Now, if you please?"

He offered to shut the door; but the Professor interposed a moment with his foot. His voice, when he spoke, was tense with animosity.

"I think it has come to me, my friend," he said, "when and how it was that you helped him to the trick. It was hardly the act of an honest servant."

"It was hardly the act of an honest master, sir, to dismiss me on the grounds you did."

"I understand—you give yourself away—it was an act of retaliation. But it was none the less a felonious act, my friend. I shall not fail to remember that when my time comes. It would be wise for you, I think, to consider your part in this conspiracy before."

"Very well, sir," said Johnson; "before and behind, if you like; and the best I shall make of it will be your disapp'intment about something, which is easy to see and agreeable to witness, though I don't know its sources, and don't care to know. Now, by your leave, sir."

The Professor, strung to speechless fury, was yet no match for the man's massive strength. He found himself on the step, and the door shut between.

In the evening Mr. Johnson repaired, with his story of this interview, to Torcello. He would have done so in any case, from an habitual instinct to report to headquarters; but it was a fact that, over and above his formal respect for duty, he had developed a quite superstitious reverence for this new master of his. The ex-detective was really an honest-minded man, and a daily contemplation of the benevolent uses made by the Remedialist of his strangely acquired gift, had filled his soul with a sort of affectionate awe of him. If he had some reason

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to associate the possession of this gift with a past little act of official accommodation on his part towards a stranger, he had as much to congratulate himself and all the world upon the fruits of that concession. He had not the least knowledge of the nature of the gift, and could only assume its connexion with that extraordinary secret inquisition of a front of old timber in the show-room of the United Service Stores. Yet, having assumed the connexion, he could not fail, even in his somewhat heavy intelligence, to consider the fact of it in the light of his former employer's attitude towards the sequel. It would appear, almost, as if Mr. le Touzel had forestalled the Professor in some discovery which had been coveted by both. Very well—and if so? Why, a pretty use, to be sure, Mr. Urchin would have made of the gift, had *he* been the first to acquire it. To him, Johnson, mankind owed a great debt of gratitude for that same super-official concession. He had given it a benefactor in place of a destroyer. He regarded Torcello with that sort of fearful indulgence which a humble foster-mother might display towards the imperious and stalwart young lordling of her nourishing.

For the rest, he was an imperviously loyal servant to his master—kept his secrets of disguise and personality; answered to his every direction like an echo. The transformed Festus could hardly have alighted on a faithfuller watch-dog.

"I foresaw it, Johnson," he said. "The man has come to some right conclusions; only a little late for practical results. He is not exactly an ordinary person; but he was guilty of an error which would have been quite natural to the ordinary person. There was a flaw in certain evidence, Johnson. Is

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he to blame me, or himself, that my wits jumped ahead of his in detecting it?"

"He looks like murder, sir."

"He feels like it, Johnson. I can tell that, without any form of a consultation. You must bear it in mind."

"I won't fail to, sir."

"I don't believe, in the ethics of things, either, that I am to blame. The Stores never bargained for the knowledge I possess in any transaction of theirs. Besides, if he had happened to be beforehand with me in gaining it, do you suppose he would have held it at the service of his employers? What would he have done with it, rather?"

"Violence and evil and black wrong, sir. That's my opinion."

"We know his utterly unscrupulous treatment of my friend. Let that inhumanity recoil upon his head a thousandfold in this same sequel to it. He deserves the worst at our hands."

"And he shall get it for me, sir. Beg your pardon, sir. I'd give up those evening constitutionals of yours, if I was you?"

"What, even in my own character?"

"Doesn't he know you in both, sir?"

Festus sighed.

"To be confined to the house entirely. But perhaps you're right, for the present."

In the meantime the Professor, baffled but inflexible, continued his surveillance of the house with the purple door. Always with the fall of evening he was there, lurking in the shadows, following with his hungry eyes the forms of all who came and issued, often starting a few steps on some impulse of recognition, and returning with a muttered snarl to his coign of

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espial. But he never saw the form he sought—never once was given the opportunity to pursue it, with what insane purpose of hatred or spoliation he could hardly realise to himself. Once, after his rebuff, he had thought of writing to Torcello; of revealing his knowledge of the truth, and demanding a restitution on a threat of exposure. But a little reflection convinced him that such a measure could only result in his own discomfiture. He had no more than a moral proof of anything. The inviolability of the secret was its strength. To confess his knowledge with menaces would be to expose his own murderous hand.

Very often he saw one figure come forth, and wondered what was its direction; and pawed restively, so to speak, in the itch to follow it. But he always managed to refrain. This generally occurred in the evening after business hours; for the Remedialist's portal was closed inexorably on visitors with the striking of six o'clock. Then, perhaps, after an interval of half an hour or so, young Mandrake would come running down the steps, and turn, generally to go eastwards. If it had been the other way the watcher might have been suspicious of the enamoured direction and have flamed into a fury of pursuit; but, as it was, he would let him go, with a low-whispered curse, on his way. It could serve no purpose—no first purpose, at least—to follow him; and, anyhow, it meant one strong, alert young conspirator out of the house. There was a potential opportunity there.

One evening he was preparing to leave the office, when a very strange letter reached him, amongst others, by the last post before closing time. It was addressed to him personally; and both the text and superscription were written, or rather printed, in a

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round, uncultured hand. He fell into a puzzled reverie over the contents:—

"*An opportunity,*" they ran, "*offers of securing what you want. Apply, Night-watchman. Three Tuns Wharf, Wapping High Street!*"

That was the whole substance; but squeezed down into the right-hand corner of the single dirty sheet of notepaper was a line of direction. "*Keep this secret from everybody. Come after dark.*"

The Professor turned the paper over and over in his hands, as he turned the matter over and over in his mind. Of securing what he wanted? He wanted only one thing out of all the world. Could it be that? He sat in a sort of ecstatic rigor, like a stricken visionary. It was not an uncommon experience with him to receive somewhat such odd communications from uneducated strangers, who, obsessed by the prevailing craze, fancied they had discovered themselves the fortunate owners of priceless treasures of art in cheap facsimiles of famous editions or modern reproductions of colour-prints. Here, however, were a locality and situation impossible of association even with such demi-semi-culture. What "find" could it come within the æsthetic compass of a wharfinger's night-watchman to offer him, and with such confidence in its acceptability? Moreover, such people never addressed him personally, nor with such precautions in the way of secrecy. What, then?

Supposing—just supposing, for the sake of a theory—that somebody—somebody, perhaps, not very scrupulous—had guessed the object of his nightly watchings and hauntings, had perhaps got wind of the affair from gossiping servants, and had set himself, professionally, to secure for him what it would be worth his entire fortune to buy? Certainly that would argue

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a little wider knowledge of the truth than he quite suspected or desired; still, if he could once get that truth under his practical control, there was enough left in it, he did not doubt, to yield him inordinate profits.

He was so possessed by the conceit, that he was already picturing his correspondent to himself for the agent or receiver of some notable burglar. His eyes stared before him, his lips bagged in a dribbling smile; he sat as if in a malefic trance. To secure the desire of his heart, perhaps; and this way! No more famished watchings and hankerings; but, without any effort of his own, his cursed enemy writhing under his heel, and the tables turned on all. Live the fraternity of housebreakers and magsmen! Drink every pretty pick-purse from Autolycus to the Artful Dodger! His wits, in this case at least, it will be observed, had made a record jump ahead of his reason. He said to himself, as he rose, that there could be nothing lost, anyhow, by his risking the venture. But, in the insane hunger of his heart, he was already anticipating triumphant results from it. That thought of the visionary cracksman had bitten ineffaceably into his imagination.

He decided to dine in town, and linger out the interval before dark, and that between his own West End and Wapping. A roaring wind met him as he came down into the street from the Stores. All life was aslant, butting at it. It smoothed the roads and pavements like a plane, driving a whirl of paper shavings before it. He was twisted and thrashed like an old torn scarecrow as he descended into the vortex. But his heart was glowing in him like a heater in a cold urn. The fast wind and low sweeping clouds had no power in them to rid him of a delusion which clung the tighter for all their tearing and buffeting.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

"FESTUS, you will understand me, I know. It is no question of greed or self-interest; it is no question of a morbid curiosity; least of all is it a question of coercion."

"Only, if I refuse to tell you, Roger, you will dissolve the partnership?"

"Yes; I know that that last statement of mine seems to contradict itself. But it is only in seeming, my dear fellow. She is all the world to me; to restore her to health is the profoundest desire of my life; and she chooses to make the operation conditional on my knowledge of your secret—and more than that, my very possession of her conditional. You can decline; you may, with perfect justice. She is a superstitious, whimsical dear soul; but in these matters love must have its head. To have refused would have been to argue mine a very trumpery pretence. I shall leave you, if I must, without one thought but for the rightness of your decision."

Festus pondered. The two men had been dining together in Wigmore Street, and the candles were shaded low in the silent room.

"You have made your pile, Roger," he said, "and you can add to it a very promising reputation. I am not sure that it wouldn't be in your best interests to cut the connexion."

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"O! don't put it in that hateful way."

"My dear boy, my heart is overflowing with affection for you. It is that way, the furthest from a hateful one, that my thoughts are running. I can realise, Roger, that, in one sense, I have imposed an unjustified condition on you. You were bred to the professional etiquettes, and there's no blinking the fact that you've offended against 'em in your association with an outsider."

"Nor is there any blinking of the fact, Festus, that the outsider made me when the etiquettes would have broken me. If you imply the least thought of such a baseness on my part—well, all I can say is that you have studied me to little purpose."

"Have I ever submitted you to the test of my secret, Roger? I might have, if for one moment I had ever doubted the honesty and nobility of your heart. But you mustn't do me such a wrong, my boy. It's not your loyalty but your interests that are in question. Now, listen here. You can elect to go, or you can elect to stay, and if the latter, why, I'll tell you everything. But bear in mind that, if a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, there may be a form of supernal knowledge that's even a deadly. I haven't asked you to share the burden, foreseeing, as I did, a better policy of practice in my sole responsibility to it. Now, if you desire to halve it with me, I doubt if we'll each find the divided part much lighter than the whole. Bear that in mind, that's all, before you come recklessly to a decision."

"Not recklessly, my dear Festus. I was made a man early, you will remember."

"You wish to know, then?"

"I wish to know, Festus."

His face was a little pale, but set into an expression

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of fast resolution. The Irishman blew the ash from his cigarette.

"Very well, then," he said. "And now I'll confess to you, my boy. You find me, as a fact, come halfway already to meet you. I have been thinking of late, Roger—I have been thinking. What if anything should come to happen to me—suddenly—and no legitimate heir to my possession? There might intrude himself a cunning, despoiling devil who would filch my secret to himself, and use it to a bad purpose. What would you know to balk or circumvent him? Why, nothing, as it stands. But if I were to make a deed of gift to you, here and now?"

"You mean the Professor, Festus?"

"Yes, I mean the Professor, Roger."

Mandrake bowed his head a moment.

"I will be my Pauline's trustee for it, Festus," he said suddenly. "That is my decision."

Le Touzel dropped the butt of his cigarette into a finger-bowl, and rose. The other rose with him.

"No need of the formal business here," said the Irishman. "We'll leave the candles just burn as they are. But close your eyes a moment, my son, while I put my hand to your mouth—so. Now rest you yours on my forehead, and speak never a word, but drink in—and understand."

. . . . . .

Something came like a little soft wind. It was the odylic current linking him to the thing he touched, making one circuit of their self-consciousnesses. At one pole were the million roots of motive; at the other the million flowers of achievement. He could differentiate among them all—analyse and classify. There was no real evil in this man, moral or organic—he could see

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that clearly. Weaknesses there were, hereditary and constitutional. He could trace them back to their sources, could picture, as vividly as if they were figures thrown upon a lighted screen, the shadowy first causes of them all. The dual personality, which in him, as in all men, was at eternal civil strife, was small and atrophied on its malignant side, and Beneficence was the crowning spirit. But as an impulsive charity may sometimes overreach itself, so here an inherent generosity was often at odds with its own conclusions. It would champion without inquiry, and denounce on unsifted evidence. But at the inmost of all burned, like a ruby lamp, a heart of human love.

. . . . . .

Somewhere, from a vast distance away, a streak of multi-coloured light was approaching. There had shone the spirit of a garden, mystic and fragrant; and suddenly the whole parterre appeared in motion, and was travelling towards him. It undulated like the embroidered train of an Amphitrite; jewelled flowers tumbled in its advancing troughs like foam and seaweed. And it rolled on and came about his feet—and it was a monstrous serpent, having violet eyes. Then he saw that the serpent's skin was for ever moving like water, under whose surface were innumerable distorted faces, which joined, and fluctuated, and disparted with the reptile's oily writhings; and they mowed up at him, gnashing their teeth. And the serpent raised its head, and its eyes opened upon him like lamps—and there was the loveliest smiling woman standing before him, and she held out her arms. He shrieked and dashed away the thrall.

. . . . .

"You have got, Festus," said Roger, "a little

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sebaceous cyst in your shoulder, which was caused by the rubbing of your braces buckle. It would be as well to have it out. Your father, if you remember, was troubled by just such another."

"He died before I was born," said the Irishman quietly. "You are overlooking that bar to my recollection."

"Of course," said Roger. "How stupid of me!"

"A little practice would soon accustom you in self-confidence," said the Irishman.

Roger sat down, feeling suddenly, if momentarily, completely demoralised. The reaction had taken him at a blow. Festus let him be; and presently he spoke out in a faint voice—

"No need to tell me now the secret of your knowledge, since, in acquiring it, I have looked into your mind. But I should like to hear, spoken to my normal perceptions, the whole history of your discovery, Festus."

"I intend to give it you, Roger. Sit quiet now and drink a glass of wine, against I come back with the documentary proofs."

"Don't be long—that climax, you know. Does it always happen?"

"Always. It's the warning to break the circuit."

"Supposing you didn't?"

"Ah!"

"You don't know?"

"How can I?"

"Don't be long, I say. Where do you keep it?"

"In the safe in my bedroom, if you ever need it."

"No, never again, thanks. I've learned all I want to."

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CHAPTER XXXIX

NIGHT, resonant and premature, had shut down upon the town as Professor Urchin came battling his way into the deep gully of Wapping High Street. The wind thundered through that abysmal ravine of brick and timber, as if it had found there the very blast-hole of the heavens. It kept the eyelids of the gas lamps at a perpetual flutter, and set the iron cables of the cranes swinging and chaunting. All the inordinate refuse of the day—dust, and straw, and the leakage of countless bales—was swept and heaped by it into remote corners. It seemed intent, in a fury of militant revivalism, on reading men a lesson in the ethics of cleanliness. The huge, high-lifted warehouses, standing up stark in the gloom, appeared to close their eyes and set their teeth to that merciless scouring.

There was hardly a soul abroad in the district. There were no night shifts in this industrial mine, and its labours ceased with the day. The wind had it all to itself, and it raced and shouted in the empty street in a very glee of self-abandonment. The Professor had hard ado to keep his legs. He might have been drunk from the way he staggered, dodging the uproarious blasts. And, indeed, in a measure he was. Fantasy and illusion possessed his brain to an uncommon extent.

The Professor had, as a practical antiquarian, a very intimate hole-and-corner knowledge of London.

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Wapping High Street would not have occurred to him, in that connexion, as a promising hunting-ground. So much the better. The bait which had enticed him thither must be presumably an ex-official one. His imagination was still obsessed, and increasingly, by that idea.

But, if Wapping High Street offered few opportunities to the curio seeker, it is not to be concluded that the Professor knew nothing about it. He had traversed it, and more than once, when bent to the explorative spirit, and his memory seldom failed to record what his eyes had observed on such occasions. He even, as a matter of fact, had a shrewd idea of where he should find the Three Tuns Wharf situated; and, as it turned out, he was perfectly correct.

The warehouse, *per se*, was so hardly to be distinguished from its neighbours, that it had been found necessary to label it across the forehead of the great gates which were its main entrance from the pavement. The Professor, stepping back into the road, read the blunt superscription, and paused a moment in a tingling glow of gratification.

He had to hold his hat on as he stood, peering to this side and that. The street about him was utterly deserted; only the wind, swooping suddenly upwards with a shriek, rattled and banged a crane overhead with the lust of a vampire who had discovered and seized upon with its teeth the dangling body of a malefactor. Then, like a half-gorged thing it dropped, and buffeted him with its wings.

He squared his ungainly old body, and set his jaw. There was a little door to one side of the big one, and thither he thought it his policy to apply. He tapped sharply on the wood with the handle of his umbrella. As he did so, a sudden spout of dust blinded him, and

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he put his arm across his eyes. In the same instant, as it seemed to him, a hand gripped his shoulder, and he was jerked into a haven of restfulness.

All noise and racket had ceased behind him. The world of roaring elements was cut off as by a guillotine. He gasped, clearing his smarting eyes. Little by little their vision returned to him, and he could gather some sense of his situation through a watery mist. There was a shut and locked door at his back, and before, mounting almost from the threshold, a steep flight of wooden stairs. A man stood on these, a few treads above him—a form quite undistinguishable in the small glow of a lantern which it held shaded in its hand. He could make out just so much, and that the form was meanly clad, and that its brow and eyes were shaded by the brim of a slouched hat pulled low. He shook his head and body, like a dog that had crawled out of water.

"An evil night to have a man out in," he said caustically. "Was it you sent me that letter, my friend?"

"Yes, it was me."

The Professor pricked his ears. An echo of something remote, familiar, yet unfathomable seemed to have entered them.

"Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

The man never stirred.

"I'll tell you that," he said, "when we've come to our terms."

"You are the night-watchman here?"

"Yes, I am."

"Alone?"

"You'd wish me to be, wouldn't you?"

"Ah! You have something to show me, then?"

"It's up above."

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"What do you want for it?"

"Follow me, and I'll tell you."

Pusillanimity, it has been observed, was foreign to the Professor's nature. An insane cupidity, moreover, was here blinding and luring him on.

"Very well," he said; "go you before, and I'll follow."

The man turned on the word, and ascended the stairs, his boots creaking like secret laughter. Up he went, slowly and heavily, the visitor pursuing. Presently they came into a huge loft, packed with casks and bales and crates so thickly, that the very echoes were crowded out of house-room, and slept for their awaking on the flight the two had mounted. The watchman paused a moment for breath, panting hoarsely, his clenched fist to his side. The ghostly small light of the lantern seemed to shrink and dilate with his breathing, as if he carried his lungs in his hand.

"Here?" asked the Professor.

"No," said the man; "higher."

"The next floor?"

"The one above it."

"You keep your secret remote?"

"I keep it where it's safest from discovery."

"Go on."

Again they moved, up and up, mounting in the feeble glimmer of the lantern, and presently they had reached to the third storey.

"It must be here or nowhere," said the Professor, stopping abruptly.

"You're right," answered the man. "It's here."

His breath so wheezed in him that, what with that and his boots, he might have been said to creak from crown to sole. He pointed with a shaking finger to

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the outer wall. "There," he said, when he could speak without effort.

The Professor followed the direction, and saw what he took for a closed shutter.

"There?" he demanded. "What and where?"

The man moved forward labouringly.

"Come," he said, "and look. You'll understand in a moment."

His fingers were already busy at a bolt overhead, which appeared to hold the shutter in place.

"Here," he gasped—"come closer. You won't gather it at that distance."

Drawn, impelled, obsessed by his one idea, the Professor advanced, and, bending his head, peered blankly at the blank woodwork. At that same instant the watchman pulled the bolt—aimed a furious blow at his shoulder—and, with a crash and jangle of chains, he was flung outward, and reeled round and fell on his face.

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CHAPTER XL

NIGHT and the furious wind rushed on him as he fell, striving to lift and fling him into that black abyss, whither his hat and umbrella had been whirled on the instant. Half-stunned in the first of the shock, the instinct just remained to him to lie prone, and present as small a body as possible to the horrible force which was struggling to shoulder him from his refuge. Presently some confused sense of his position returned to him, and he lifted his face an inch or two.

"What have you done? Where am I?" he cried desperately.

The glimpse of things he obtained was enough for his enlightenment. He lay on one of those external traps which, being used to project from a warehouse floor for conveniences of unloading by crane from the barges below, can be dropped outwards like a shutter and held in position by chains. The race of roaring cloud went by close above his head, it seemed. Sixty feet below the black water was ravening for his fall—leaping and mouthing by the wharf side, like a pack of little dog waves eager for the "kill" to be dropped among them. A slippery square of wood was all his hold; he dared not stir an inch for fear of losing it.

The night-watchman, standing in the aperture close by, answered him with a deadly laugh.

"Don't you know?" he said. "A poor fool, after all, to be nicked by such a tale!"

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The Director dropped his head with a groan; but as instantly lifted it again.

"Who are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Who am I?" snarled the man. "Ask, rather, what will you be in a moment. Look you, you cold-blooded dog. One chain hangs loose already; I've only to unhitch the other, and down you go into the water. It'll hold you fast and safe enough until the grapnel comes to hook your lying throat. If you stir or make one effort to help yourself, that moment I cast loose. It's got to come in the end, too; but maybe you'd like to have a minute first to breathe a prayer. It's more than *you* ever allowed to your victims, master."

"I know you now," gasped the wretched man. "You're Stedding."

"Aye," answered the watchman; "and curse your own knowledge that it comes too late. Yes, I'm Stedding, sure enough—the honest servant that you had dismissed for an accident so trumpery that to have turned a dog out of his kennel for it would have proved you a greater brute than him."

He coughed in a rending spasm as he spoke; but the fury in him mastered the convulsion.

"I believe I'm dying," he said; "but don't think that if I felt the cold hand at my heart this moment I wouldn't find time to kill you first. Do you understand, you dirty hound? You ruined me, when you refused me the character I'd earned through ten year of faithful service—you ruined me, and I took to drink. I've lived for nothing else since—for that and the thought of revenge. A fine couple to go hand in hand. When one slacked, the other was always there to give him fresh heart. Through poverty, and disease, and disgrace, too—down, down, till my character isn't

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worth a day's purchase and my lungs can hardly find me the breath for a glass. I got this place by a trick, and I shall be found out soon enough and dismissed. But it showed me the first chance to my purpose that had ever offered in all these months, and I took it. When it goes, I can whistle it away content. You will be lying choked in the slime then, or drifting up Limehouse Reach with your white face grinning at the sky. So easy gulled, after all. I'd hardly dared to expect it. I could laugh, till I dropped, over the poor fool listening there, and all his wisdom and his sharpness unable to see through a drunkard's cunning. And the secret between us two alone! Will any guess how you got into the water? Not more than of any other drowned dog that strands and rots upon a mud-bank!"

A second cough rent him. As he fought it away, his hand stiffened on the chain.

"Come," he said, "I've no time nor words to waste—nor nerves neither. It cost me my last shilling to brace them up to this. Down with you! There's no eye to see, nor ears to hear you, though you scream your throat inside out in this black night."

His muscles tightened as he bent to the chain. In the tumult of his passion a stream of oaths and snarls came pouring from his lips so thickly that their volume choked him. He reeled and staggered back a step, still keeping his hold.

Over the prostrate man outside the block and hook of the derrick, lifted high above, seemed to rock with laughter; the wind nudged him boisterously in the ribs; what was he thinking as he lay prone there, his limbs bruised, his face bleeding from the fall, the dreadful blast swooping and tearing at him, a few

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moments only, perhaps, separating him from a hideous plunge into eternity? What gambler would have staked a penny to a fortune on the chance of one nerve of reason or resourcefulness remaining to such a one in such a situation? Yet he might have risked it here, and come out triumphant. The man, horribly threatened as he was, was incapable of imaginative tremors. They did not rise to obscure his mental vision, or to shake his self-possession with one sick thought of the limits of the tiny ark which was his sole refuge in those blown heights of darkness. Now, hearing the little stagger of his enemy, he held his face erect, and looking the man, on his coming to, steadily in the eyes, addressed him sharp and strong.

"You'd be a fool to murder me, Stedding."

The watchman's left hand gripped harder on the chain. His flurried breathing shook him, as its steam does a worn-out engine.

"Should I?" he said. "Then I'm going to be a fool."

"Five minutes after it's done, Stedding, you'll be wishing that some one would murder *you*. Look at your face—look at your hands now. Are those the hands and complexion of a case-hardened murderer?"

Involuntarily the watchman relaxed his hold an instant, then tightened it once more with an oath; but the chain trembled in his grasp.

"The horrors will come in a little, Stedding," went on the clinching voice. "Don't you know that, my man? What have you got left to fight them with? You should have robbed before you murdered me, you fool!"

"Give me your money," quavered the murderer.

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"Throw it over, do you hear?—all you've got. I'll sell you another five minutes of life for it."

"Will you?" said the voice. "I think I'd rather go down, with that thought of the retribution I'm leaving behind to speed me. Ho-ho for the watchman, Stedding, with the new devil he's raised to himself in these black glooms up here! He'll not be long following me, I think."

"Curse you! Go down!"

"I'm waiting."

Nevertheless the watchman did not move.

"Why should I be a fool to murder you?" he said suddenly, in a high quavering voice. "Don't dead men tell no tales?"

"No; but the men that they haunt do."

"You've ruined me. You've drove me to the devil. I can't get this thought of murder out of my heart."

"Keep it there, then; only use it to a better profit. I'll show you the way."

"*You*!"

"Yes, I."

"It's a lie—a plant. You'd swear an information against me the moment you were free."

"On what evidence? We're alone here, aren't we?—quick—quick—I'll pay you and employ you—do you hear?"

His words were almost lost in the fury of the gust which swept upon him at the instant. The slippery boards gave his frantic fingers no hold; his legs to the knees were already over the edge; the watchman, dropping forward, reached and seized him by the wrist.

"There," gasped the Professor. "Hold on, and pull your best. Ah!"

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They lay, head to head, prone on their stomachs. Was ever mortal colloquy conducted in such a position before or since?

"I'll pay you, and well," gasped the evil old man. "If you serve me as I desire, there shall be no limits to your fortune. I've been wanting such a confederate as you for long."

"Confederate, master?"

"Aye. No use at this pass to play with terms."

"It's life I want."

"Isn't money life, you fool? You shall bathe in it, if you like. We'll meet conspiracy with conpiracy."

"With murder?"

"I don't say it; but what if I do? There'll be that for you to drown it in forgetfulness. A better prospect, I think, than what awaits you here. I'm going. Another moment, and it will be too late."

His knees hooked desperately at the boards. Stedding flung his own left arm to the assistance of his right, and, with a strenuous tug, drew the whole body into safety. The wind, baffled of its prey, dropped for a minute, and the pause was filled by the stertorous breathing of the two men. Then, inch by inch, the Professor began to edge his way to safety.

The watchman, utterly unnerved and exhausted, lay like a log. Presently the other was standing in the opening behind him. His breath came heavily, but his muscles were taut as bow-strings.

"A fine reverse of our positions, Stedding," he said. "What do you think now of a drop into the river?"

With a scream the watchman whipped up, and flung himself into the warehouse.

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"Mercy!" he cried. "I'll serve you to the death, sir—faithful I will."

The Professor turned, and lifted the lantern from where it stood on the floor.

"Come," he said, "to where we can discuss things without temper. But I shall have to deduct the cost of a new hat and umbrella from your first wages, Stedding."

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CHAPTER XLI

"ROGER, you know?"

"Yes, I know, Pauline."

A little silence fell between them.

"Is it—is it anything very dreadful, Roger?"

"It is something very, very strange—rather awful—hardly credible. I could not have believed it, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I had put it to the test myself."

"Yourself? Then it exists as something apart from Mr. le Touzel—something——"

"It is still his secret, dear."

"And yours, Roger."

"Yes; but only as his confidant."

She fell into an aggrieved reverie as they strolled on together.

"If it is all to remain so dark and mysterious," she said suddenly, "I don't see how your knowing much alters things."

"Is that quite fair, Paulie? I promised only that I would ask him; and I have asked him, and he has told me."

"But are you any the happier for the knowledge, Roger?"

"Well, no, honestly, I don't think I am."

"No; I was sure of it."

"But you mustn't think for that, dear, that the

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revelation has shocked me—at least from the point of view of my friend's conduct of his secret. If it was destined to become any man's, it couldn't have chanced to one more weighted with a full sense of his responsibility to it. I am as convinced of that, Paulie, as I am, more fully now than ever, of the injustice of the estimate you have formed of him."

She looked down, unanswering. There is never any convincing a woman, though by proof positive, against her intuitive sentiments, whether they be for love or dislike.

"I daresay you are right and I am wrong," she said presently. "Anyhow, you have done what you said; and so I must keep to my word."

He looked into her face eagerly.

"You will, Paulie? You will consent to the little operation?"

But his enthusiasm sank on the instant.

"No, you don't mean it," he said.

"I do," she answered. "I won't go back on my word."

"Pooh!" he retorted. "Not in the fact, perhaps; but in the spirit you will."

"No, I won't, Roger."

"I am disappointed in you," he said curtly.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I can't help it," she said. "I *am* distressed, for myself, and for you, and for all the misery and misunderstanding this connexion seems doomed to work among us. I wish you would end it, Roger, and set up for yourself. I would be willing to wait years longer for you, if I could only once know you settled into a practice, however small, on your own account."

"Wait years longer!" he retorted indignantly. "And don't you think of *me* at all?"

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"O, Roger! You know I do."

"It doesn't look like it. I'm not built on Jacob's lines, I'm afraid."

"I don't want to stand in your way. I've told you so; and I mean it from my heart. But I don't think you quite realise what I'm made to suffer, Roger."

A remorseful pity seized him on the instant.

"You poor thing!" he said. "I daresay I'm a wrong-headed brute; but my love runs ahead of everything else, Paulie, seeking the shortest way to you."

"You would suffer in pocket by it, you mean?"

"O! as for that, I daresay I could afford a wife at this present moment, young lady."

He bent, canvassing her face.

"Paulie," said he, "if I were once to come and tell you that we had dissolved partnership, would you then consent to the operation?"

She looked up, her eyes swimming with tears.

"O, yes, yes!" she whispered. "I promise I would."

"Very well, you darling," he said most tenderly. "And now we'll drop the subject."

He spoke his thought to Festus that evening, squarely and honestly.

"No need, my boy," said the Irishman. "I saw it in your face from the first."

He came round the dinner-table, and took a chair by his friend, and put his hand on his shoulder, with a light of humorous kindness in his eyes.

"Roger, my son," said he, "we've got to part."

Mandrake made a gesture of distressed deprecation.

"It seems so disloyal and ungrateful."

"We don't judge on seemings. Don't we see deeper into the truth, you and I? No need of

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occultism here to give one understanding. I can read you as I might myself."

"Can you, Festus? Then you read a very torn sense of duty."

"A man's love claims his first. I shall be melancholy parting with you; but I see my duty there, as plain as yours. Should anything come to happen to me, now, it would be well that you were dissociated from me first—sailing your own craft into prosperous waters, and while enough of my reputation remains, perhaps, to speed your canvas with a puff or two."

"You have hinted before at the possibility of something happening to you. What do you fear, Festus?"

"I suppose I'm subject to mortality, like all the rest of the prophets, barring Elijah, sonny."

"You mean more than that."

"Well, I'm very respectably hated by some members of your profession, I think."

"And that."

"True for you. I'll not be disguising it any more. It's the Professor I mean, Roger."

"Festus! You don't think he would go to such lengths?"

"I've never taken the measure of his conscience, my boy; but I've a pretty accurate eye by nature. You know now what his grudge is against me, and you've seen something of what it can urge him to. He'll not be stopping at that, I think. The question is only where he'll break out next. It was a very mortal disappointment to him, that same business, Roger. I believe, as a fact, it half unhinged his mind. You've never given me, by the way, your opinion on the ethics of the case."

"As regards your title to the secret, do you mean?"

"Exactly."

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"I confess I wish it might have happened some other way."

"Well, so do I. But the healer must gather his simples where he finds them—even if it's in a co-operative society's preserves. Supposing I had left it to him?"

"Heaven forbid, I must cry to that."

"There you are, you see. But I'll admit it's a complicated question. Anyhow and for sure you can stand none the worse with him for cutting yourself adrift from this same robber of his roost."

"Who will you get to replace me?"

"Leave that be for the present, my son. You'll not be for ending our acquaintance altogether, I suppose?"

"If you dare such a suggestion, Festus, I shall refuse to go at all."

"No, my dear fellow; but I mean in the way of our joint interests. It needn't follow that because you are non-resident, you shouldn't continue to profit by the concern. I can still send you on my overflow, as to an entirely independent practitioner."

"What a dear good chap you are, Festus!"

"And in the meanwhile you'll be looking out for a house with all despatch."

"I hate to go. I wish you didn't think you'd reason to be apprehensive about that old man."

"Hist, you 'young-eyed cherubim.' 'Xerxes did die, and so must I.' But not yet awhile, I hope. Forewarned is forearmed, isn't it? I think I shall take Johnson into my confidence."

"Johnson! You don't mean——"

"I mean it in the fullest sense. The man's as honest and square-standing as any of us three. Besides, he's possessed of a particular grudge against the

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grudger. He'll just grasp the salient facts, and become my threefold sentinel on the strength of them. Yes, I'll tell Johnson."

"Well, you know best."

"With all modesty, I think perhaps I do. I must guard, you see, against the chance of my being knocked on the head by a possible father-in-law of my *alter ego*. The hangman mustn't be let complicate our relations, Roger."

"I wish——"

"What?"

"O, nothing!"

"Well, so do I; but he's got an immense constitution, my boy."

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CHAPTER XLII

IT was a Sunday morning, and the Professor was closeted in his study in St. Peter's Square, when a visitor was shown in to him.

A little accident of broken china, and the penalty it had entailed upon an old servant of the United Service Company, may occur to the reader as having been mentioned in the second chapter of this narrative. It is surprising to reflect what moral wreckage may result from a single act of acute injustice. Stedding, spared that sense of inhuman wrong, might have stood on the hither side of respectability for ever. A slight disposition to the bottle may have been his amiable but tempered weakness in the days of his prosperity; being disgraced and impoverished, his immediate instinct was to justify his degradation by becoming a drunkard. He flew from honesty to corruption, and in a few months had become a worthless, trustless soaker.

He had primed himself for the interview now, it was evident—not grossly, but just nervingly. He could face no situation in these days without such a tonic. His manner, as he stood before his old-new employer, halted between servility and effrontery. There was a flush in his haggard cheeks, and a cunning leer in his glazed eye, which somehow discounted the extreme humility of his attitude, as he stood twisting a battered billycock in his hands. An old red handkerchief was wound round his neck in lieu

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of collar, its ends buttoned tightly into the breast of a mildewed morning-coat of once black cloth; his ragged, unbraced trousers sagged over a pair of boots so shapeless that it seemed a miracle he could ever have learnt to keep his balance in them. Glancing from under his eyelids stealthily at the seemingly preoccupied figure, he thrust his tongue into his cheek, displaying in the act a very old graveyard of scattered teeth.

The Professor whipped round on the instant. It is well for the unwary to remember that spectacles can reflect from their inner surfaces.

"You have been drinking, you dog," he said.

The man, struck dumb one moment, shifted his shoulders insolently the next.

"What if I have?" he said. "Didn't you mean me to?"

The Professor showed his own teeth, regular and vicious, and shook a warning finger at the fellow.

"You will, will you?" he said. "What have you done with the money I gave you to redeem your clothes?"

"It wasn't enough for both—God's truth it wasn't."

"You lie. It was enough for moderation."

"Moderation isn't enough for me, then. It takes something over to wind me to the pitch."

"What pitch, you hog? What demand have I made upon your nerves as yet?"

"I've been about your business, sir—honour bright, I have; and discovered something, too."

The Director of Antiquities held this obscene jackal of his with a penetrating stare. The man shifted uneasily under it.

"Well," he said, at last—"what? Speak out."

"About Mr. Mandrake, sir," answered the man,

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between fear and sullenness. "He doesn't sleep in the house; he never did."

"Ah! I wish I had known that before; but go on."

"He has rooms, sir, in Russell Square, Bloomsbury; and now he have taken a house there—a whole house, sir, all of his own."

"Well?"

"He's took it furnished, sir, and put a brass plate with his name on the door. It looks like as if the two have separated, sir."

"That's something—that's something, Stedding. If we could only manage to get the other alone."

He fell into a profound fit of musing.

"Don't I promise you," he said, looking suddenly up, "that if we can once carry this thing through between us, you shall have the means to drown yourself in liquor if you like?"

"I know that, sir," said the man. "But I'd humbly ask you to bear in mind, sir, with all deference, sir, that drowning's only an excess of a necessity. I must drink, sir, in the meanwhile, if I'm to do justice to your confidence in me."

"'To pour the spirits down to keep the spirits up,' eh, Stedding?" said the Professor. "But I'll humbly ask *you* to bear in mind, my friend, that following that principle too closely may result in a weight at both ends, like a dumb-bell."

"I know my own balance, sir," said Stedding. "My brain goes with my feet, and so long as I can walk, I can talk."

"Talk, you drunken babbler!" exclaimed the other scornfully.

"And the short and the long of it is," said the man, becoming suddenly truculent, and smacking fist into palm, "that if you want to keep me going in your service, you must keep me wound."

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He was "wound" now. In another hour, fresh stimulant lacking, he would be grovelling in maudlin terror of his own late daring.

The Professor rubbed his chin reflective.

"Very well, Stedding," he said by and by; "so long as you keep clearly before you the object of your mission, I've no objection."

"It's to find out," said the man, "where this Torcello hides away the secret of his craft. I haven't forgotten that, have I? I haven't *babbled*, or failed of caution, or missed to take what side chance offered of discovering useful facts, have I?"

"Not yet, perhaps."

"Not yet, perhaps! You'd better get another to do your dirty work."

"So I'm thinking."

"*You!*"

The man started, and stood with a half-frightened, half-incredulous stare.

"You'd better mind what you say," he muttered threateningly.

At one step the Professor had him by the throat. The vicious grip of the old man was terrifying.

"You hound!" he said. "There was one watching us from a neighbouring warehouse that night all the time I lay at the mercy of your murderous hands!"

It was an inspired lie; but it served its purpose. The abject, brain-sodden creature fell on his knees, collapsed and struggling.

"At a word," snarled the Professor, "I can send you where you'll never be likely to come out again."

"No, no!" The man choked under his hands. They shook him like a rat. When at length they released him, he fell over in a fit of coughing as if he would die.

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"Get up!"

Stedding, shivering and wheezing, staggered blindly to his feet.

"Are you going to threaten me again?"

"No, sir, no, sir, indeed. It'll have been Tom Tressidy, I suppose."

"Suppose what you like. What are you going to do next—to earn any title to my forbearance?"

"I was coming to it, sir—on my immortal soul I was. For pity's sake don't give me up, sir. I'll tell you—I will indeed."

"You'd better, I think."

"Much better, sir. I didn't mean it, sir. It was only that I was carried away a bit—overwound, and gaining time, as it were."

"Speak out, then."

"I'm going to, sir. It was just this, sir; that——"

He broke off, and looked about him wildly.

"O, for mercy's sake," he quavered, "give me a drop of drink!"

"Not I."

The man uttered a whimper of despair, quite wasted on his merciless inquisitor.

"I don't believe I can last without it," he said.

"You'll have to, or go—and it had better be pretty far for safety."

"God forgive you, sir. No; I'll try—I will indeed. This Torcello——"

"What about him?"

"He gives one half-day in each week to the poor, sir—Wednesday morning it is."

"Well?"

"Any one may go, and gratis; and dozens do. I thought I'd apply to him myself for advice, and, when alone, choke his secret out of him."

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Professor Urchin, pondering the suggestion, laughed raucously in the fool's face.

"Is that all your proposal? And how many gallons would it need to wind you up before? More than your reason could carry, I expect. Don't you know that the moment he touched you, he would be able to read every thought in your sottish mind? Leave action to me. I shall know how to take it when the time comes. Your part's the scavenger's, to clear the road before me. Still——"

He fell into a frowning fit once more, and presently, grating his chin, conned his visitor wintrily.

"There's something in it," he said—"not to see the master but the man. Do you know that our old detective, Johnson, is his door-keeper?"

"No, sir."

"Well, he is; and in the conspiracy, if I'm not mistaken. What if you were to go—just about the closing of the free time, say—and get into talk, and try to worm something out of him. He hates me, as you do."

"No, sir."

"As you do, I say. And all the better. You'll be sympathetic spirits, and he may come to unbosom himself to you. The man's a dull-witted fool, and a little craft should draw him. The more you expatiate on your wrongs, the more he'll be attracted to confide in you. Only beware that your hatred in the end doesn't prove a traitor to your interests."

He lifted his head suddenly, and listened. There was a sound of voices in the hall outside.

"What!" he muttered; "he'll dare! not enough said yet! We'll make it final this time!"

An insane glare was in his eyes. He snapped open the study door, and almost leapt into the passage.

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CHAPTER XLIII

"YOU dog!" roared the Professor. "How dare you enter my house?"

Roger had not hoped much from the forlorn essay; but love and duty, and an urgent sense of what they both expected of him, had decided him upon making it. With the memory of his last discomfiture rankling in him, he might have been justified in declining to submit himself, unless on some peremptory call, to the chance of a repetition of so humiliating and unnerving an experience. But he had an excellent quality of stubborn straightforwardness, and it bore him firm-fronted to face anything which he considered it would be pusillanimous on his part to evade. He was not going to fail to put in his last word for the right, just because a rabid old man shouted at him. But on this point he *was* determined—that that word should be clear, as temperate as circumstances would allow, and uttered with all the force of an ultimatum. He stood up, resolute and manly, in the dining-room whither Pauline had pushed him. The Professor hurried upon them standing there.

"I have something to say, sir," answered the young man quietly, "which you may or may not think justifies my action. If you will hear me, well and good; if you decline, well and good also. It will acquit me finally of any moral obligation to appeal further to your sense of justice and reason. I fear

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that that will prove a vain appeal, as it is; but in any case I must ask you to respect my honest intentions so far as to refrain from any such expressions of feeling as characterised our last interview."

The dignity of his words and bearing had their effect. The Professor chafed intolerably under them; but in a manner the virulence in him was cowed for the moment.

"You're quite an orator, sir," he sneered. "It will be an intellectual treat to hear the peroration to this fine exordium."

"I cannot forget, sir," said Roger, "that you are the father of your daughter."

"Exquisite!" ejaculated the Professor.

"And," continued the young man calmly, "it is to her, to my deep affection for her, and my desire to spare no effort to remedy, by the last means in my power, the unnatural relations which have come to exist between you and her, that you owe this visit. I, the deeply wronged one of us two, should not have dreamed of it else. How could it be possible for you to believe, sir, that I would wilfully hurt her, whom I love so, through her natural affections?"

"Moving," said the Professor. "Quite in the best style of melodrama!"

"I believe," said Mandrake, still steadily, "that you *had* convinced yourself at last that your original base suspicions of me were unfounded."

"Had I? Indeed, now!"

"In any case they were and are. At the same time, I, for my part, am quite ready to admit that my subsequent association with a certain person—purely accidental, as it happens—may have appeared a suspicious circumstance to you—one questionable enough, even, to reconfirm in you your original doubts."

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"That is a very handsome admission."

"Well, sir, I can only ask you to take my solemn word of honour for the assertion that, until within a week or so ago, I knew nothing whatever of any reason for your connecting me with my friend in the question of the original unexplained charge which you brought against me."

"But you know at last?"

"Yes, I know at last; and this is the sequel to my knowledge which has brought me here. If it is that association with another which has been to account for your extreme bitterness of feeling towards me, the cause no longer exists. We have agreed to separate."

The Professor adjusted his spectacles with a quick movement. The latent vindictiveness in him was beginning to reassert itself irresistibly.

"A new nest," he said—"a nest a little, perhaps, of the character that exists in rookeries. I had heard of it. I make a point of hearing many things. You had feathered it well, I daresay, before coming to this virtuous resolution."

"I have feathered it honestly, sir. The fact should not militate against me, I think, as a suitor."

"That is a matter for your own conscience." He flamed out suddenly, shouting and convulsed. "Ill-gotten plunder, you specious, rapacious, cursed carrion-crow! Do you think to blind me by your casuistries? I was robbed, you dog, robbed! Do you understand what I mean by that?"

"I understand what *you* mean."

"I see. You hold a different opinion?"

"It is unfair to ask. The question, whatever may be its ethical significance, is not one between you and me."

"Not? Not when you have made yourself an

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accessory after the fact? Not when you have grown rich on the plunder? What are you, after all, with all your canting platitudes on honesty, but a receiver of stolen goods?"

"We shall not agree as to that."

"No. What reformed robber of the destitute and the deluded ever thought of vindicating his cant through restitution? Restore, you hound!—restore, or make your accomplice restore, and then come to me with your talk of wrongs and natural affections."

The young man stepped back a pace, as if to put himself between the shrinking, weeping girl and the ungovernable fury of her father. The Professor understood the act, and yapped at him like a mad dog.

"You young devil!" he said hoarsely. "What, more insult in the house you have come to outrage and pollute!"

"I have said all I have to say," answered Roger, cold as stone.

"Then listen to me," cried the old man, dodging and dancing to get a view of his daughter's face. "*You* there, listen to me. I told you once that if you persisted in attaching yourself to this loafing scoundrel, you must suffer the consequences. I ask you finally if you will give him up—him, your father's cursed enemy—and return to your duty?"

Mandrake, white and grim, dwelt upon the answer. He felt that the strain and agony were passing beyond this poor child's endurance. But he did her spirit wrong. She came and stood, a staunch young heroine, by her lover's side.

"My duty is here, papa," she said, in a voice that shook only a little. "I have promised him, and he is good and noble. I give myself to him, if he will have me, for your atonement, papa."

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The Professor leapt and roared, as if his side had been smitten.

"Out of the house with you both!" he shrieked.

She stood trembling.

"Papa! O, where?"

"On to the streets, for all I care!" he raved. "I've done with you. Take my curse and go!"

Roger passed an arm about the poor half-fainting creature.

"It will recoil upon your own head, old man," he said sternly. "Make way, while my hands are held from you."

Holding, supporting her, he went resolutely by, and dwelt just a moment in the hall.

"Courage, darling," he whispered. "Be brave—it's only for a little while. I'll put you with a good old soul I know; and then—— There, hold up your head!"

"I brought it on you, Roger," she said in agony. "Don't cast me off. O, save me! Take me away!"

He put his lips to hers a moment.

"Come!" he said—"my wife."

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CHAPTER XLIV

THERE is a corner of London about which the faint aroma of some long dead and gone prerogatives still clings, like, as it were, to the rosy odour of sanctity about a shattered vessel of godliness. This is the area near St. Paul's Cathedral once known as Doctors' Commons. It formed a very close and exclusive corporation in its time—which dated from the first "spacious days" of the Established Church, and ended with the hurrying era of gas-lamps and locomotives—claiming within its precincts the exclusive control, and profits, of a vast amount of legal business, since ravished from its hands. The Courts of Arches, and of Prerogative, and of Admiralty, and of Probate and Divorce, are no longer included within its bounds—indeed, the bounds themselves were ages ago confused and obliterated under the encroaching foot of commerce; but still, in discarded nooks and corners, some remnants of its ancient privileges survive. Such, for instance, are to be found in the dispensations of the Vicar-General's Office, of the Bishop of London's Registry, and of the Faculty Office in Knightrider Street, where the most Reverend His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury maintains his right to dispense special marriage licences, at the inclusive terms of twenty-nine pounds and eight shillings per licence, or thereabouts.

Mr. Roger Mandrake had closely studied, in

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Whitaker's Almanack, the particulars of this privilege before he ventured to set his foot in this ancient fastness of chartered ecclesiasticism. He was clear on the fact that to justify his request for a licence to marry (name to be specified), under special circumstances, at any time, and in any place with or without previous residence in the district, he must first assign to his Grace sufficient reasons for his being entitled to take so extraordinary a step. Well, he was satisfied of his power to do so. What circumstances could be accounted more "special" than those which turned upon the inhuman eviction of a tenderly nurtured young lady from her natural home, and her repudiation by her own father? He went on his way confident.

He would himself have preferred—perhaps in a spirit of instinctive economy—a marriage by licence before a registrar, which would have been just as quick and efficient, and on the whole less noticeable. But he had perceived Pauline to take the suggestion so unhappily that he had waived the point with an instant generosity, and engaged to salve her poor troubled conscience with the orthodox sanctions. After all, twenty-nine pounds odd was a cheap price to pay for beatitude.

It was a lovely sunny morning. As he passed down Carter Lane, the little old dark attorneys' offices, where in days gone by many of the Collegians had come to settle with the dust of their upheaval, had no appeal for his blunt imagination; but it *was* moved to reconstruct from the past the figure of a Mr. Tony Weller, stage-coachman, rolling up the narrow pavement, by the bulging windows with the little panes of glass, in charge of a Proctor's tout. He laughed joyously to himself, for his heart was alight with

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love and good-humour as he turned down Pilgrim Street—appropriate title! "Pilgrim of Love" was he.

"You can't be married in black, you know, my darling dear," Mrs. Batten was saying in the meanwhile to the destined bride.

The good landlady was a patient and *protégée* of the young doctor's, and it was to her motherly care, in Southampton Row, that he had committed the forlorn object of his devotion. Pauline had borne up very well, and submitted to all arrangements made for her with a wistful obedience that had been touching in the extreme. She moved like one partly stunned—but not so much by the cruel outrage itself as by a sense of the chasm which still lay between her and safety. Her strained anxiety to see that pit bridged for her passing over might have formed a base text for base minds; but Mrs. Batten understood and sympathised.

"There, my precious," she said. "Try to think of him, gay as the lark, coming home with the licence in his pocket. A dear gentleman he is, and Providence will look after its own."

"Are you so very fond of him, Mrs. Batten?" asked the girl softly.

"Fond!" cried the landlady. "Who wouldn't be as had once come under his ministering care? There's no cherub as could equal him in tenderness, or show such a fine figure. I declare I'm jealous of you. But there, now; we must think of tomorrow."

"I can think of nothing short of my petticoat, dear Mrs. Batten."

"Hark at you, now! Your petticoat! But I see you're laughing at me. You'll come round sure

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enough. It's only drawing on him for a day that's to be the first of a lifetime."

"O! I mustn't! I mustn't, indeed! Please understand, I mustn't take any of Mr. Mandrake's money. It would be tempting Providence."

"Well, now——" The good lady pondered shrewdly a little. "Take some of mine."

"Wouldn't that be the same thing?" pleaded Pauline. "How could I ever return it, if——"

"Ah!" said the landlady, after a pause, "I'm glad you're ashamed to say it, my dear."

"To say what?"

"Why, hinting he could be false to you."

"I never did," cried the girl—"my true, kind lover. But there are other things—accidents—and I am so full of miserable fears."

She broke down a little. Mrs Batten flew to solace and reasure her. In the midst a knock was heard at the door.

"It's him!" whispered the landlady ecstatically. "Now dry your eyes, my dove, while I send him in."

"Paulie!" cried Roger in another moment.

She lifted her face, quivering and wet with tears. All doubt vanished from her in the glow of that sunshine.

"Come and be married at once," he said.

"Roger!"

He knelt, and took her all to himself.

"I've got the licence, and the ring, and made all arrangements at the church," he whispered into her ear. "I've been working like a galley-slave to earn us our liberty. It's promised within the hour, darling. Are you pleased with my impatience?"

"My—my black dress," she murmured.

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"I have never seen you look so beautiful in any other," he said.

That laid her scruples.

* * * * *

They were married in the Church of St. Giles's-in-the-Fields, and Mrs. Batten was the witness. Afterwards the two went to lunch at a restaurant in Oxford Street. It was all very sensible and matter-of-fact in appearance; but, if it had been an Alexander's feast, what more could it have expressed of the rapture of two young hearts conscious of the sweet, inseparable link which had come to bind them. Rather less, for outward show must rub a little of its gilding from so dear and strange a mystery. They had chicken and champagne, in the orthodox wedding-breakfast fashion, and Pauline's single glass made ichor in her veins. She sat there in an ecstasy of this peace which had fallen after tempest. It was all so beautiful and incredible. Every mouthful that her husband—*her husband!*—ate (and he ate sturdily after his royal exertions) was manna to her love. She watched him feed, as Lynette watched Gareth, with a proprietary satisfaction in his noble hunger. Henceforth she was to be the caterer to this princely appetite—to surrender herself to be her lord's handmaid, and fit herself to be his comrade.

They spoke, they would speak, nothing of the shadow behind them. Indeed, the dazzle in their tranced eyes blinded them to all present thought of it. And, even when the prose of daylight should return to them, had they not taken up a position which was unassailable by the forces of malice and hatred? They were no longer isolated souls, but comrades-in-arms, franked by divine credentials. The shadow might rave and menace henceforth—it had

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lost the power to fling between and divide them. Her late sick terror of her father; her realisation that her once-assured confidence in her power to sway and control him had been founded upon an ignorance of his diabolical potentialities in the face of opposition; all this terrified disillusionment, in short, was succeeded in Pauline's heart by a feeling nearer pity than fear. The mastering terror once laid, behind this new stronghold of matrimony, she could think of it only with a very tragic sorrow, as of something which had represented the agony and death of a long-cherished ideal. She mourned over the inevitable loneliness which the old man had brought upon himself. That must be for evermore, as regarded the eternal alienation of their souls. But, as to forgiveness, he had yet only to ask, and she would assure him of it.

Roger paid the bill, and turned to her.

"And now for home," said he.

The word gave her a momentary shock. In all this agitated confusion she had never quite realised this pitching of her virgin tent in a strange land. Home! for twenty-one years it had never had but the one natural significance for her; and here in a moment it meant something else, leagues and generations apart from her single experience. She was very silent as they drove to Russell Square in a hansom. Her cheeks were pink and her lips smiling, as if in a little trance of wonder, as they entered the house. Its proportions and furniture were something utterly beyond her expectations, and the staid solemnity of the lower rooms was lightened by a very garden of flowers—in vases, in window-boxes, on stands. She knew the loving thoughtfulness which had provided them, and, without a word, fled into his arms, and cried quietly.

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"Now," he whispered, "I want you to come upstairs."

She did not speak; but let herself be led away by him after a little. As they neared the first landing he put his hand over her eyes, and presently withdrew it.

"There!" he said. "Does that please you?"

A very bower of a room, all woven out of silk and flowers and sunbeams. The curtains of the bed were sprayed with a tiny moss-rose pattern; the toilet-service was silver-topped and backed; the wardrobes and other furniture were glossiest Chippendale of the deep walnut colour; an oblong Sèvres mirror, held up by little flying Cupids, stood on the dressing-table and reflected wet lashes, and the prettiest, most loving face in the world. It turned, as its owner leaned back, into fond, embracing arms.

"Do you really use silver-backed brushes, Roger?"

"I!"

He laughed enjoyingly.

"This is all for you. *My* humble appointments are in the dressing-room there. I was shopping all yesterday after I left you, and was out again by eight o'clock this morning. I was in such a state about their not being here in time! As to a wardrobe, I had to order it on trust and on approval, after taking several young ladies into my confidence. You'll find a heap of boxes in my dressing-room—I don't know what's in 'em. But I'm going to leave you now to overhaul it all, and send up Mary to help you. She's my parlour-maid, and the pleasantest girl you could imagine. To-morrow you must set about clothing yourself according to your own notions, and making your own rules and regulations. This day's for love, Paulie."

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She turned swiftly, and flung her arms around his neck.

"Love!" she whispered. "O, Roger! my love so frank and generous and considerate! loyal through all this wicked slander and persecution. I can rejoice in them for that—because it has proved my dear love's devotion. But, for him!—O, why did he do it?—why did he do it?"

She slipped down, till her arms were clasping his knees.

"I will never question one word of yours again," she said. "I am your slave, Roger."

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CHAPTER XLV

WITH the fulling of the year, so ripened Torcello's fame. He became the wonder of the season, and built himself up, literally, a golden reputation. His cures, they said, were marvellous, incredible. They owed, it seemed, to some extraordinary faculty of insight, which enabled him to detect not only the nature of most ills, but their predisposing causes. He affected no resounding antonomasia, but just told people what was the matter with them and why. Old long-seated complaints, either pronounced incurable, or not so pronounced but believed to be—little mines of profit to the canonical physician—were traced to their roots by the Remedialist, and their right treatment suggested. Worn-out constitutions were restored by him, and organic displacements rectified. Wherever there was enough vital principle left to form the nucleus, as it were, of a reconstructed existence, he could effect marvels. It was only when the fuel of life had been consumed beyond rekindling, that his knowledge was, and professed itself to be, of no avail.

It always required a certain force of resolution to submit oneself to the Remedialist's judgment, because his pronouncements were never known to fail. A visit to him might be equivalent to a reprieve, or a respite, or a capital sentence. In most cases, it was true, he sent the patient away gratified and comforted; but

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there were other instances. This quality of infallibility surrounded him with a rather awful halo. Society, altogether, was content with penetrating it officially, and forewent any attempt to include the mystic among its boudoir lions. That social shyness of him, and of his formidable parts, quite fell in, as it happened, with Torcello's mood. He had no wish nor intention to be exploited by Mayfair. The profound mystery which enwrapped him was, for one thing, his most valuable asset; for another, some solemn quality in his possession seemed to make him averse from cheapening it by submitting himself to the curious scrutiny of the idle. Secret and impenetrable, he remained shut away, a much discussed personality, behind the purple door. No one knew anything whatever of the details of his life, *ex curia*, in that silent abode. On the stroke of ten o'clock a.m. its portals were opened to the maimed and the suffering; on the stroke of six o'clock p.m. they were closed. The porter at the door was as impenetrable as his master; for the rest, it was understood that his *ménage* included three servants, all men, and all deaf-mutes.

One half-day a week the Remedialist devoted to the service, commendably gratis, of patients who could not afford to pay a fee. He had to accept them on their moral merits, for of course no respectable orthodoxy would assist him with its recommendations. But it did not matter. He could detect hypocrisy and false pretences among other things, and many were the saving dowagers and penurious pensioners who, thinking to impose, ill-dressed, upon his beneficence, descended his steps, with furious red faces, having been enlightened as to nothing but their own meanness. From ten to one every Wednesday constituted this free time.

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It was actually striking the latter hour on one such morning when a shambling, degraded-looking fellow, pushing by the last of the poor company which had just emerged from the doorway, accosted the solemn porter who was on the point of shutting it out.

"Too late, sir?"

"Too late, my man, for this week," answered Johnson.

He took some particular stock of the new-comer with the words, and rubbed his chin reflective.

"Why, I ought to know you," he said. "Ain't you Stedding, as got his dismissal from over there in my time?"

The stranger affected to start.

"God bless my soul, if it isn't Mr. Johnson!" he exclaimed, with rather a thick utterance.

"Ah!" said the ex-detective coolly. "You won't seem to have taken your misfortunes in the right spirit, Stedding."

"I took them with all the spirit I could," answered the man.

"So I should have thought of you," said Johnson. "Maybe it's the consequences of your taking them with too much as has brought you here. But it wasn't that sort I meant. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm very ill," said Stedding. "My lungs are all gone to pieces. I'm afraid I'm booked for a better world, Mr. Johnson."

"I wouldn't be so sure of *that*," said the porter. "But you were always a weak, conceited chap, you know. You should have got the better of circumstances; and you would if you'd had any real spunk."

"Don't you know he wouldn't give me a character?"

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"What did you want with giving, when you'd got a good one of your own?"

The man struck his hands together in a feeble fury. If he was acting, it was evident that he had a certain capacity for feeling his part.

"If," he said hoarsely, "I could be sure, in the justice of things, that *his* life would be called to pay for mine the moment it was out, I would hear him in there pronounce my doom with joy."

"Would you, now?" said Johnson easily. "Well, you'll have to postpone the chance of that pleasure till next week."

"A dog!" muttered the man—"a cursed, inhuman dog!"

He was sober enough to be watching stealthily for the effect of his words on the figure before him. The result was not reassuring. Not a ripple of emotion of any sort disturbed the ex-detective's solid visage.

"It's only a little more time that I want," went on Stedding—"just the assurance of a respite long enough to enable me to find the means to be revenged on him. I live for nothing else; I——" He broke off suddenly, and squinted up into the other's face. "Why, now I come to recall it, Mr. Johnson," he said, "didn't he give you the sack, too?"

"I wonder," said Johnson.

"—And for as trumpery a cause as mine, I'll be bound," went on the other. "He's no bowels of justice nor decency—a dog, and one that ought to meet a dog's death."

Making a movement as if to seize the porter's arm, he missed his balance, reeled a little, and had to catch at the door-post.

"Mr. Johnson, my superior old friend," he said;

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"if the great Torcello would only once touch me with that magic ring of his, and assure me that I had another three weeks to live, I'd look forward with ecstasy to spending it in the condemned cell."

Johnson's face was immovable as a Greek mask, and did not speak half so much of the character of its wearer. Behind that inscrutable surface were working some very shrewd speculations as to the possibility of this fuddled vagabond being here to play the jackal to a more cunning beast. He held the door to, completely filling the aperture, as he took motionless stock of the man.

"Mr. Johnson," said Stedding, with a pickpockety leer, which he intended for an expression of blandishment. "*Won't* you stretch a point for an old friend and fellow-sufferer, and get your master to have out his ring again—just for this occasion? It can't be put away just yet, now can it? He hasn't had time to dispose of the thing, unless he keeps it locked up in his consulting-room. But perhaps he does."

Johnson stood conning him, unanswering. The fellow fulled out his voice into a tone of vinous emotion.

"Does he, Mr. Johnson? It would be so simple a thing, then, to get it out again—consider, just a bit of a ring to slip on your finger. It *is* a ring, isn't it?—if the common report's to be believed. O, do stretch a point, old friend, Mr. Johnson!"

Then the ex-detective spoke, protruding an arm like a drain-pipe.

"You've had your answer, Joe Stedding. Get off that step and slope. If you utter so much as another word, I'll carry you down myself, and give you in charge for causing annoyance."

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Stedding, collapsing on the instant, gave one or two inarticulate gasps, and, turning, took himself off at a double shuffle.

He appeared, wound up and renerved, before his employer that night.

"He wasn't to be drawn, sir," he said. "I tried him, and couldn't get a rise of any sort."

"You were drunk, I suppose."

"I wasn't no more drunk than my duty required, sir. If you'd been there, I think you would have admitted I tackled him cunning."

"Stedding, I don't think you promise to be of much use to me."

"Don't say that, sir. Didn't I find out about Mr. Mandrake? didn't I discover the constitution of the Remedialist's household—about those deaf and dumb creatures?"

"Matters of common knowledge, you ass—or at least of common report. I don't say they aren't contributory to our purpose; but the main thing—the repository of the secret—that is as far from our guessing as ever."

"It's never out of my head for a moment, sir. It can't be long before some lucky chance will set us on the trail."

The Professor uttered an impatient exclamation, and set to pacing up and down, his hands behind his back, his eyes raking the floor. It was a way they had got into of late. They seemed to be for ever following some elusive object. The famine of an insane passion shadowed his sunken cheeks, and spoke in the eternal twitching of his shoulders and fingers. Had he any sorrow or remorse for a deed late committed? It is to be feared not. The madness of a baffled hope had come to possess his soul entirely.

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It had obscured all other issues whatever, and was focussing itself on a single definite point. Often, now, the elusive *something*, as he pursued it with his eyes, seemed to possess a shining core of crimson. He was "seeing red," as the French say.

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CHAPTER XLVI

PAULINE lay on a sofa in the pleasant drawing-room of her new home. Her right foot was rather heavily bandaged, and was propped on a cushion; but her face was quite quiet and happy—as restful in suggestion as the swathed limb itself. She had actually undergone, as a matter of fact, the long-deferred operation the day before, and the knowledge that henceforth she was to walk like other people, and to stand a thing complete before her husband's eyes, was the emollient most curative to her wound. Festus had diagnosed, as always, unerringly, the fragment of a needle had been found exactly at the spot he had indicated, and its removal had restored some paralysed nerves of motion to their natural part and business in the context of her young anatomy. She lay, feeling ineffably secure and at peace.

The night without was at curious odds with her mood. It was a night of fury and battle, full of mad cries and tempestuous charges. It would seem as if the warring forces of the weather, reversing the accepted order of things, were all gathered *within* this Russell Square, and were endeavouring to rush their way out of it. The rain swept the window-glass in drowning volleys, the wind thundered on the walls, and, rising baffled, ricochetted over the roofs, and exploded harmlessly in the deep garden trenches on

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the other side. Pauline, in the panic pride of her young wifehood, prayed that her husband might not be summoned out in such weather.

She lay knitting, and smiling to herself in the comfortable warm room. Every detail of that testified to the lovingness of her welcome—the flowers, the pretty furniture, the many little feminine knick-knacks, selected at haphazard, but all with a view as much to her pleasure as to their use. Now and then she would glance about her with a contented sigh, and then fall again to work and reflection.

What a dear he was, and what a fortunate woman she! Now that all doubts and apprehensions were cast behind, she could gather his loyalty and tender self-sacrifice into their proper focus. Would ever another man in the world have done for his love what he had done for her—so humoured her distresses and superstitions at the cost of his masculine sense and fine bondage to a friend? Now, having had her way with him, she was quite willing to admit both his and her own indebtedness to the man from whom she had succeeded in separating him; but did that repentance come quite in time to save her own respect for her own means? Had she not taken advantage of his sweet faith in, and affection for, her to enforce a measure on which she of all people should have had the least right to insist—she, the daughter of the man who, by his cruel persecution, had driven him into the arms of that same good comrade and helper? She had acted as if the obligation were his, not hers. She gave a little fluttering sigh, and her eyes for a moment filled with tears. She wished he would come upstairs, and dissipate the small unkind shadows which had returned to cloud her happiness.

Returned; for, indeed, they would arise now and

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again, perhaps to spite the fulness of her security. She never could quite forget that that friend, though he had justified upon her own body his beneficent uses of a wonderful gift, still held her husband thrall to that same gift's secret; that her good, honest Roger was still morally the confederate of one who dealt in the occult and uncanny. She never could quite forget that her father and she had once lived upon at least presumptive terms of affectionate intimacy. Her recent enlightenment upon the relative values of devotion had laid finally and for ever some old delusions; yet these one-time ideals were not to be so easily forgotten but that she must still dwell on in the hopes of a compromise of some sort being suggested. She could never respect her father again; but if he would only approach her so far as to afford her the opportunity of a return to duty! And the days had gone on, and he had made no sign; and she could not be the first to speak—she could not. Roger, for all his generosity, had told her so; and she knew that he was right.

He had written, immediately after the wedding, to acquaint the old man, coldly and formally, of the step which they had taken. His letter had been brief, and couched in terms as remote from denunciation as from apology. But it had remained unanswered. The Professor, if his correspondent could have known, had simply torn it into a hundred pieces, flung those into the grate, and thereafter dismissed the matter from his mind. He could do it, in the deadly obsession which had come to overwhelm all his normal faculties.

But Pauline lived on in the fond expectation of that answer—or any answer, so long as it would break the hard frost of silence—arriving. Her ears were

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for ever pricked to the postman's knock; her eyes were for ever turned in searching inquiry to the salver on which the letters were brought to her. She started now, when the familiar rap-tap sounded in the hall below. But Roger's hands, when at last he came up to her, were empty. She breathed out a tiny sigh, then turned a radiant face to her husband.

"Not called out, I hope, dear?" she said.

"No," he answered, "thank the powers. An awful night, isn't it?"

He came and took a chair by her side, as she lay, and, imprisoning one of her nimble hands in his, sat softly conning her.

"Going on all right, Paulie?"

"Yes, darling—quite well and happy."

"Aren't you sorry, now, you ever questioned my faith in him?"

"I never questioned your faith, Roger, but——"

"But what?"

"His right to it."

"Well, you are convinced at last?"

"Yes, I must be."

"That sounds a little grudging."

She looked up lovingly into his face.

"I don't want it to be. If it should appear so, it only shows a natural reservation—in a woman."

"What does that mean?"

She moved a little, expressing one of those indescribable invitations natural to lovers. He had his arms round her in a moment, his cheek to hers.

"Tell me, Paulie," he said.

"I don't want to appear ungrateful," she answered, tenderly conscious of the caress. "I think you knew him better than I did; and, after all, so you do now.

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I mean only that, if I read him wrong, it was because I had to take so much on trust."

"But not now, dear?"

"Why not, Roger? O, don't mistake me! I am sure he is a good man, and always puts his power to the most noble uses. You would not assure me so, otherwise, knowing him as you do so well. Though there is an understanding between you which is hidden from me, I should be a bad wife to doubt it. Still—it can't be helped—but there *is* the secret."

He drew away from her a little, thoughtful and frowning—not with any suggestion of unkindness in the act.

"I think I understand what you mean," he said presently. "We are one in everything else, but still divided on that point."

"O! not divided, dearest," she answered distressfully. "If it hurts me at all, it is not because of a mean curiosity, but because there remains just that one subject on which my husband cannot be perfectly frank with me. I know he cannot be. I don't ask or want him to. Only the little shadow plagues me sometimes. Roger, Roger! Come and sit by me again. I didn't mean to worry you. I won't say a word more about it."

"Hush, Paulie!" he said. He was walking softly up and down the room. "I didn't get up because I was offended. I want to think it out, that's all. God knows I should like to tell you. After all, isn't a man's wife himself? Supposing I put it to him—ask his permission? He wouldn't refuse me—old Festus. But it's of you I'm thinking."

"Yes, Roger darling—always of me, I know. Come and sit down again—do."

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He obeyed, and sat holding her nervous hand, and pondering deeply.

"How the wind howls!" he said, looking up suddenly. "A night which sets one thinking of all sorts of tragedies and dismalities."

"O, don't, dear!" she exclaimed shiveringly.

"Of course I won't," he answered, "my little fearful spouse. There, we'll put it all away for the time being. I don't know what's got on my spirits. The devil rides the night, I think——"

His voice stopped, in a fall of the wind, to hear a sudden violent knocking at the hall door below.

"Phew!" he said. "I'm not to be left in peace after all."

Pauline's hand trembled in his. They sat waiting expectant—and turned with one impulse as the door of the room opened.

A figure, blown and sopped and battered, stood in the opening—the figure of Johnson, the ex-detective.

"You must come at once, if you please, sir," he said.

The man's face, for all the buffeting of the blast, was as white as paper.

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CHAPTER XLVII

THERE are public-houses in the neighbourhood of Wigmore Street, as where are there not? For men must drink if women must weep is the one incontrovertible adage of our golden age. They are not low public-houses, of course, but they have this in common with all other establishments of a like persuasion, that their most persistent and profitable customers are not those who drink for thirst, but those who thirst for drink. Mr. Stedding, imbued with a tenderness for the welfare of the "Blue Crocodile," had made that gilded hostelry his particular house of call of late.

This choice had its justification in one essential respect. The "Blue Crocodile" (we must not identify it more closely) stood "contagious," as Mrs. Malaprop would say, to Wigmore Street. A man, finding himself suddenly demoralised or unnerved in that stately thoroughfare, could always fly to it at short range, and find therein his ark of refuge. Mr. Stedding's range had perfected itself by custom. He could hit the "Blue Crocodile" from any given point in its neighbourhood.

Now coincidence and Providence must be admitted by all right-minded people to be analogous terms; wherefore, to question the omnipotence of the "long arm" is to be profane. The world, after all, as people are for ever remarking, is an extraordinarily small

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place. They refer, generally, in saying so, to those coincidences of friendly encounters in remote and unexpected regions which come within every one's experience. But if coincidence, as a term for Providence, may be accepted as applying to the synchronal arrival in Hong-Kong, or Bombay, or New York, of acquaintances innocent of any mutual pledge to meet anywhen or anywhere, how much more must it associate itself with design and predestination in the casual reunion of long-dissevered pot-companions in a public-house bar. For the bar, of all places in the world, is an International Institute, and therein may be found the very moral and epitome of all so-called coincidence. Let any one only haunt it long enough, and he may count on quite a number of the most curiously accidental meetings.

Mr. Stedding, therefore, as an honoured habitué of the "Blue Crocodile," had no reason in the least to feel surprised when there walked, or rather swerved, into its public tap one morning the figure of Mr. Jebb, ex-expert locksmith. He had claimed, and exploited, some acquaintance with this gentleman in days not so very remote, and he quite hailed his re-entry into his bibulous field of vision.

Mr. Jebb, it appears, had worked for the Stores, in his own time and Stedding's, and was a past-master, in the fullest sense, in his craft. A weakness for strong waters had proved his undoing also. He had come to see double locks where single only were in the contract, and the Stores had been obliged reluctantly to dispense with his services. It is to be supposed that, at this time, he had shut himself out from the profits of all employment faster than he had ever helped to secure other folks' for them. Nothing remained patent in him but his propensities. He was

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existing, like the fodderless camel, upon the capital of his own hump. His grievances had given him that.

He recognised the Stores ex-*employé* after a reminder or two, and accepted the claim to his past acquaintance with a certain air of condescension, a little slurred in the manner of its delivery. But the suggestion of a glass, for old friendship's sake, ingratiated and stimulated him at once. The two, seating themselves on a bench, got hob-nobbing—the bar, for the moment, was empty of all else—and exchanged amenities.

"I'm sorry to see you looking so low, sir," said Stedding. "You don't look at all, sir, the man you was."

The locksmith shook his head, with a very sick, sanctimonious expression.

"I daresay for that," he said—"I daresay for that, my man. Life, sir — life, Mr. Stedding, must be constant oiled in its wards, if the key to its successes is to be kept on turning."

He did not refer, it is to be presumed, to that oil known as fusel, with which he may be said to have rather over-lubricated his own mechanism.

"Indeed, sir?" said Stedding, pulling, with a highly-flushed face, at a blackened stump of a pipe. "You refer to the emoliments of your trade, I presume?"

The locksmith aimed a denunciatory blow at his own knee, but, mistaking the direction, swayed forward, and only saved himself from falling by clutching desperately at his companion. Having safely got hold of him, he treated the situation as if he had intended it.

"My dear fren'—my dear ole fren'," he said, emotionally and almost tearfully, "we live in a worl'-

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where merit has to be its own reward. We live in a worl' of serpents—sir."

He stopped suddenly, and looked, a little uneasily, at the floor, as if conscious of the danger of his own invocation. Stedding helped him back, sympathetically but firmly, into an attitude more or less erect.

"You used to be a famous hand at your trade, Mr. Jebb, sir," he said. "I remember we used to call you the prince of locksmiths."

Mr. Jebb shook his head again, with a watery smile.

"And so I was," he said. "More shame to them as has let me be disinherited."

"How did that happen, sir?" asked Stedding.

Mr. Jebb continued to wag his bemused noddle and to purse his lips a great number of times.

"What with tumbler and permutation locks, and simple and complex movements, and bolts and stop-plates and all that, a man's head gets wore out in time," he protested. "Wards will become Chinese puzzles and keybarrels teetotums. They said I put in a lock agen burglars that only a burglar could open."

He seized Stedding's knee with a gloomy and tragic expression.

"It was a lie, sir," he whispered hoarsely. "The man as opened it was a soopernoomary postman, as had never known a job of the sort, and he said it come away in his hand."

He sat back and folded his arms fiercely, as if in triumphant refutation of all his traducers.

"The prince," he said suddenly, striking his breast, "the prince of locksmiths—you're right, my man, and deposed by traitors from his pin-hicle."

Stedding, holding his pipe in his mouth with his hand, because his scant teeth were unequal to the task, drew furiously and nodded sagely.

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"It's the fate with us all, sir," he said.

It would appear, however, that he had by no means said the right thing. Mr. Jebb, conning the speaker gloomily and incredulously a moment, broke suddenly into a short and rather offensive laugh.

"Us, my man!" he said. "Why, you ain't never for putting yourself up on to my level, are you?"

"I never meant to suggest such a thing, sir," returned Stedding meekly.

"*I* should think not," retorted the locksmith. "You and me, indeed! A very simple movement would serve your turn, I fancy, Mr. S."

He began to weep.

"That I should be ranked with a drunken porter!" he protested wearifully. "Me, as has been favoured with the confidences and shared in the secrets of the first in the land! Why, in this very neighbourhood, sir, no further away than Wigmore Street, sir, I once put a little safe into his wall for a gentleman as has made the kingdom ring with his fame since, sir."

"Indeed, sir," said Stedding, suddenly interested. "You won't be meaning the great physician Torcello, sir, I suppose?"

Mr. Jebb wiped his eyes, with a leery chuckle.

"I mean what I mean, my man," he said, "and I know what I know. That's enough for you."

"I never meant to express any curiosity, sir," said Stedding, "except what is natural to an admirer of your genus. Say no more about it, and have another glass."

Mr. Jebb was mollified instantly.

"I don't believe you did, Stedding," he admitted. "You're an honest man, Stedding. I don't mind confiding in you that it was a rather pretty job, that—just a little iron box, no bigger than a tea-

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caddy, and fitted—O, my dear fren', that lock! Talk of your Chubbs and Bramahs! It was a miracle, though I say it—it was, indeed—just a miracle of hart. It was the crowning achievement of my life; I might call it my swan song. To compare it with the maze at 'Ampton Court would be to insult my intelligence."

"I'm sure of it, Mr. Jebb, sir. And fitted into a hole in the wall, you say?"

"Over the mantelpiece in his bedroom, Mr. Stedding—behind one of the hoak panels as have a concealed hinge, and the keyhole to it hid under a false extry foot of the electric-wire casing what turns on a pin."

Mr. Stedding laid a mental note under a gulp of the spirit which had just been supplied to them, and resumed cunningly—

"I wonder you don't consult him, sir, about this lowness of yours—an old customer like that, and open, I should say, to consider his indebtedness to you in the matter of his terms."

Mr. Jebb, who, having swallowed *his* jorum neat, was suddenly and rapidly approaching incoherence, wagged his head with a fixed smile on his face.

"Indettleness!" he murmured. "The Remedialhic indettled to his locksmid? Why not? Les be partners—me and him and you, Steddle. I wonder wally keeps in the box?"

Thus lost in luminous speculation, his hands flagging on his knees, the emptied tumbler destined to drop in another moment from one of them, his every fold and feature seeming to sag idiotically, we may draw the curtain over Mr. Jebb.

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CHAPTER XLVIII

IT rises upon a tableau only less obscene than the last, because more deadly in its suggestion. It is evening in the Professor's study, and the figure of the half-insane old man is standing bent above another, which his eyes are studying and his lips apostrophising. He is dressed, muffled rather, in fact, for the street, and for once in a way has exchanged his habitual head-gear for a felt hat with a low-shadowing brim. The veiled light of a reading-lamp obscures rather than reveals the working of his features, while its full radiance beats upon the face of a man who sits lolling with glassy eyes in an elbow-chair under his hand. That poises a decanter, half-full of an amber spirit, over a lately emptied wineglass standing on the desk beside.

"More yet?" he says.

"One more," answers Stedding thickly.

"Hold out the glass. Let me see you hold it steady."

"Don't you want me to be drunk?"

"I don't want you to be incapable—you know that. You must be wound to go, not overwound to stop."

"There, then."

The drunkard seized the glass by its stem, and held it without a tremor at arm's length. On the instant there came a crash of rain on the window, and the

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glass fell to the floor. The Professor lowered his arm.

"I am answered," he said.

The man jerked forward in his chair.

"If you choose such a devil's night for your devil's job," he said, "you must take the risks. Hark at it now—only hark at it, I say!"

The rain was making itself a waterfall from the high gutter on the roof. The tempest seized and shook the casement like a ravening wolf. There was no speaking or thinking for the moment in that wild uproar.

"What do you want with selecting this night out of all nights in the year?" said Stedding sullenly, as the wind dropped for a little.

"Because it happens to come pat on my purpose," answered the other coolly.

"See here, then, master," said the man, stooping and recovering the dropped glass. "It isn't broken after all—a good omen. No more am I. Tempest without must be met with tempest within. One last one, come, now."

The Professor stood at pause a minute.

"Why tempest within?" he said. "There's no especial call here upon your nerves of resolution. Your part is simplicity itself."

Stedding, leering forward, snapped his fingers.

"*My* part?" he said. "What's yours?"

"You have no concern with that."

"Haven't I? What, not as your decoy, you old villain."

"Decoy, if you like."

"Yes, and accessory, too."

The Professor very softly settled the decanter on the table.

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"Accessory?" he said. "To what, you dog?"

Stedding's voice already quavered a little as he answered—

"You know best, sir."

"Do I? You are mistaken, my man. Answer me, now, in a word. What have I engaged you to do?"

"Engaged me—to do?"

The Professor did not answer.

"Why," said the man desperately at last, "to go out in all this storm and rain, and knock on the purple door."

"Well?"

"And, by playing intoxication, to decoy Mr. Johnson into seizing and running me out into the street, while——"

"While what? Why do you stop?"

Stedding collapsed.

"Nothing else, sir," he murmured feebly.

"You see?" said the Professor. "What a simple thing, and what a mighty conspiracy you seem disposed to make out of it! That won't do, you know."

"No, sir," said Stedding humbly.

The Professor, holding him with a glittering eye, opened his left hand, and displayed a folded scrap of paper lying therein. Very deliberately then, and never withdrawing his gaze from his miserable cat's-paw, he spread out the sheet, and revealed a five-pound Bank of England note.

"You see that?" he asked.

The greed in the other's eyes was his sufficient answer.

"Very well," he said, and refolded the paper, and thrust it into a side-pocket. "Convince me, at the last moment, of your capability for your task, and I put

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that into your hand. It represents, I think, a good sum of what you desire. More, and much more, if you serve me well, may come to follow."

"I'll do it, sir."

"That's enough, then. And now for one final assurance. You are certain of the position of his bedroom?"

"I can't be mistaken, sir. I've watched the lights in the windows a many times, and so sure as the rest went out, his was turned on, and showed the shadow of him on the blind."

"First floor to the right above the porch?"

"That's it."

"And you've never had any reason to doubt the testimony of your friend the locksmith?"

"Never, sir. I got it all out of him when he was in his cups."

The storm drove on the window again with a mortal fury. A thin gust of it, entering by the chimney, lifted a sheet or two of paper on the table, and floating them to the carpet, escaped screaming through the keyhole of the door. Stedding huddled into himself with a gasp of terror.

"When are we to go, sir?" he shivered out, when silence had fallen again.

"You say his bed time is ten o'clock?"

"Punctual, sir, unless he has company. I've never known it to fail."

The Professor looked at his watch, with a little inward laugh.

"Company!" he muttered. "Not to-night, I expect, or at least the last he looks for. It's a quarter to nine now," he said aloud. "We must be moving directly. It will be a stiff walk in this wind."

"Walk, sir!" wailed the man.

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The other stared at him sinisterly.

"Walk!" he echoed. "Why, of course. Did you expect a chariot, and a footman to run up and knock and give our names?"

"O!" Stedding looked about him despairingly. "I don't think I can do it, sir; I don't indeed, unless——"

The Professor crossed the hiatus with a lifted warning finger.

"No more of that, my man. Now, understand; I'll concede you one final glass the moment before we start. That must suffice till the end; then"—he tapped his pocket—"you'll have two clear hours at least to break into this. Wait here till I come and fetch you."

He took up the decanter, walked across the room with it, and disappeared. The drunkard, straining his panic ears, heard his footsteps mount the stairs, and creak into a room overhead.

"My God!" he muttered awfully. "How's he going to do it?"

That was the Professor's secret. It would appear to take some suggestive form in the shadow of a small implement which he was at that moment withdrawing from the recesses of a private drawer. This implement was shaped somewhat like a slim dumb-bell, about nine inches long, and heavily loaded at both ends, the whole being encased in a tight-fitting string jacket. It was nothing more nor less, in fact, than one of those genteel "life-preservers" so called, which, devised for self-protection in the days of the garroting mania, had chanced in the way of business into the hands of the Director of the Stores Antiquity Department.

He drew it forth stealthily, listened, cast a cautious

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look around him, and, giving an experimental slash or two in the air with it, slipped it into his coat pocket.

"No blood," he whispered to himself. "Just a blow on his head if he wakes; or, if he sleeps, and makes no sign—but no blood, no blood. It's not calculated for it. The pillow mustn't tell."

The footstep sounded over Stedding's head again—coming out—coming down.

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CHAPTER XLIX

WAS it Coincidence or Providence again? He had formed a plan, in his mad self-delusion, of lurking, in the storm and darkness, in the neighbouring porch, and of then, the instant that the living obstacle to his passage should have been decoyed well abroad by his accomplice, crouching down and sneaking his way swiftly through the opened door, and so upstairs into the bedroom, where he was to trust to chance for cover. But now, beating down, in the tearing rain, upon his destined ambush, he spied suddenly before him a refuge and resource which he had never looked for. It stood on the pavement right opposite the purple door—one of those little brown tents or arks with which working electricians cover the scenes of their underground operations. Whether it had been left there intentionally, or had been abandoned in some sudden scamper induced by the tempest, mattered nothing. There it stood, the most coincident, or providential, asylum imaginable. He put a hand on Stedding's arm, stopping him.

"You see that?"

"I see it, sir."

The rain beat wildly upon them, as they stood a moment regarding the thing.

"Could anything more opportune have offered itself?"

"You mean to hide inside, sir?"

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"At once. Are you ready?"

The man shook himself, with a quick catch in his breath.

"I'm ready, sir."

"Prepared to play your part?"

"I'll do my level best."

"Do you *feel* drunk?"

"Not so much as I could wish, sir. But finding myself committed to it may stimulate me."

"I believe it will. There's the note."

"Thank you, sir. I'll let myself go, thinking of it."

"I've brought a last dram with me. Down with it, and slip the flask into the gutter. *Now* are you ready?"

"Ha-ha, sir! ha-ha, you murdering rogue! Get under the sheets, you old devil. There's not a soul to be seen in the street."

With one swift look about him, the Professor stooped and dived. Providentially the wind had torn the fastenings of the tent, leaving the skirts of the opening flapping. Crouching within amidst a litter of tools and piping, he listened and looked, peering between the folds which he gripped close.

* * * * *

Mr. ex-detective Johnson, having finished his supper in that particular little closet in the basement which was appropriated to his exclusive use and possession, was enjoying a luxurious pipe, when his ears were assailed by a most stupendous thumping and banging on the hall-door above his head. He sat listening for some moments in a sort of petrefaction of the senses. What sacrilegious insolence did this uproar portend? Surely some freak of the elements must be to account for it. He dwelt breathless on the ensuing silence, but only for a minute. The incredible noise was

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almost immediately resumed, and this time unmistakable in its direction. He remembered that his master was engaged in the consulting-room in some experiments on one of the deaf-mutes, and, firing over the thought of the annoyance it must be causing him, laid down his pipe, got to his feet, and stepped noiselessly but swiftly upstairs. Driving soft-footed down the hall, like a charging rhinoceros, the bang of the knocker met him full-face, and made him stagger. Uttering a forcible ejaculation, he wrenched open the door—and saw Stedding standing on the step outside. For an instant he was stricken dumb with astonishment.

"What the thunder!" he exclaimed at length. "Was it you raising that racket?"

Stedding caught at the door-post.

"Where's your marser?" he jerked out—"I wan'—see him."

"*You want?*" breathed Johnson, unable to credit the man's audacity.

Stedding pirouetted slightly, and fell against the lintel.

"I'm very bad, sir," he murmured. "I'm very bad indeed, Misser Johns. I thought, p'raps, as an ole fren' you'd say a word—f'me."

"Now, look here," began the porter in an exasperated voice; but the other harried him down shrilly.

"I doan wan' look—thas jus' it. If I look, I see them coming at me. I wan' him stop them—I wan' him see me at once."

The porter took one peremptory step forward.

"Get out of this," he said. "Get out—do you hear?"

Stedding clung obstinately to the lintel.

"I wone," he cried; "I wone go without seeling him!"

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Johnson deigned not another word. He simply flung his arms about the struggling creature, tore him from his grasp, and carried him, clawing and fighting, down the steps. But still Stedding clung to him like a very animated burr. He was acting, if he was really acting, his part so realistically by this time, that it was odds but that the fiction was destined to affect his disordered brain with all the force of fact. The self-possession of a drunkard comes to be a very precarious tenure towards the end of things. Only a little shock is needed to qualify him for the strait-waistcoat.

Little by little the maniac drew his gull away from the steps, holding to him tooth and nail, and battling without ceasing.

"It won't do, Stedding," gasped Johnson. "You'd better drop it and clear out, if you don't want to be given in charge."

They had drifted by this time some fifty yards down the street. Suddenly Stedding gave up the fight and stood panting.

"It's all right, governor," he said, when he could get his breath. "I can see clear again now, sir, and I'm sorry I made a fool of myself. Let me go, and I'll go quietly. Look there!"

The detective involuntarily turned. On the instant the other took to his heels, and was out of range in a moment.

Johnson stood watching his retreat a minute, startled and bewildered. Something—some change from incoherence to coherence in the man's last words—had penetrated him with an icy sting of suspicion. He set off suddenly, making back with all speed for the door he had left open.

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In the moment of the descent of the wrestling couple into the street, and of the first of its reeling dance along it, a cautious head was protruded, like the head of an evil old tortoise emerging from its shell, from the under-folds of the tent. Peering an instant, it saw the unguarded door open, and everything clear; and, on the thought, the debased form of the Professor glided forth, and, stooping low, slithered up the steps.

It was done—the ruse had triumphed. The old wolf stood up in the fold he had so long coveted, and gave a sigh of ecstasy. The soft-felted stairway rose before him in the slumberous light. Without a moment's hesitation he made for it.

With his foot on the first tread, he slipped his hand reassuringly into his pocket. Yes, it was there safe enough—the little genteel bludgeon—the "open sesame," if needs must be, to the treasure he was risking so much to recover. That was the self-justifying term he used. He had no particular wish to do hurt, although he had been so basely wronged. It was simply his design, all prospering, to conceal himself within the Remedialist's bedroom, and, its tenant once profoundly asleep, grope, soft-searching, for the key of the panel in the wall, and obtain possession of the little safe behind. No doubt, listening and observing from his coign of concealment, he would discover easily enough the place of that key's nightly deposit—perhaps in a tabernacle no more exclusive than the great man's trouser pocket. Beyond this he had formed no plan, save and only in the event of Torcello awaking. But he rather hoped and expected that he would be spared *that* necessity.

A mad scheme, formulated of a mad and desperate brain, and foredoomed, one would have thought, to unfruition.

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He was ascending the first steps swiftly, list-footed as a cat, when the opening of a door, and a rapid step coming into the hall, brought his heart into his mouth. Still he went up.

"Who's that?" cried a quick, imperious voice—Torcello's own.

Still he went up. Buds of perspiration broke out on his forehead—not the sweat of panic, but of apprehension for his deed's success. He was mounting like a lamplighter now.

The voice again cried out, summoning the scurrying shadow, and footsteps began to follow. He turned a corner, reached a landing, and paused one instant in indecision. His hand slipped into his pocket.

The footsteps, fierce and determined, were close upon him now. Breathing heavily, he backed into the darkness of a room which opened behind him. The footsteps paused an instant, and darted forward.

One blow, and the pursuer was down—the ball of lead seemed to sink into his skull. He dropped, without a cry, in an inert heap. But, as he fell, something spun from his hand and rolled into the darkness of the room, where it lay. It seemed to emit a spot of violet light. With a strangled cry the Professor threw himself upon it, and the thing came up in his hand. He was weeping as he held it—weeping as he came to the door with it.

"Mine at last!" he quavered brokenly.

"You scheming, murdering dog!"

Yet another—Johnson this time. The man stood by the tumbled body, barring his way.

"Look here," he said, "your work, and for what? Ah, I understand! Give that to me!"

With a quick movement the Professor passed what was in his hand to his mouth. In the same instant

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Johnson sprang at him and gripped at his throat. But his fingers missed, and, with an oath, he stumbled, and dropped upon one knee.

"Ah! my God!" shrieked the Professor. He was staggering and tearing at his own neck and chest. "Ah! my God! I swallowed it! keep it off me—pull it away—it's choking me in its folds!"

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CHAPTER L

THE hansom so tore through the flooded streets that its wheels, in the flash of the lamps, appeared, like Catharine wheels, to squib fire instead of mud. It seemed a wonder that its driver, swaying above on his frail perch, could keep his balance and his head together; but cupidity, like patience and perseverance, will surmount difficulties, and the promise of a treble fare make a Jehu of a jarvey.

"It's no good, sir," had said Johnson to the young doctor, as, having heard the latter's directions to the man, he had jumped in and closed the apron upon them both. "Unless he can beat Time himself in the race he won't overtake the dead."

Mandrake did not answer for some minutes, but sat —with a face as white as, and more rigid than, the porter's own—leaning forward and listening to the quick flop and rattle of the traces, and the periodic swish of the lash on the horse's smoking flanks.

"Dead!" he said suddenly, as if the race had in fact run temporarily ahead of his hearing. "You are sure of it, Johnson?"

"As sure as man can be, sir."

"He swallowed it?"

"He swallowed it, and it killed him."

"No, no, Johnson; no, no, my good fellow. It must have been a stroke—some cerebral lesion caused by his mad excitement. You understand, Johnson?"

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"Yes, sir."

"No one must know or guess. It must go down into the grave with him, and no one must know. You are sure you understand me?"

"You can trust me, sir. I was the only witness. Let it go to the bottomless pit for what I care. Its use must be perverted since it—that thing—got its folds about the man—poisoned, belike. No one shall hear of it for me. It's not of him nor of it that I'm thinking any longer. It's of the other lying there on the bed where me and the mutes got him—lying with his eyes and his teeth shut, like a soul in hard trouble."

"My dear old Festus! Johnson, Johnson! but he's still breathing, you say?"

"Yes, he's breathing, sir. But it was a mortal knock. I heard it as I ran up."

"How slow the fellow drives! What have you done with—with the other?"

"Left him where he fell. It was all over in a minute. The devil got and choked him."

"Hush! you're forgetting. I wish we could avoid an inquest altogether."

"I'm afraid that would never do, sir—what with the deaf-mutes and all. Who could give the certificate? Not you, sir, seeing the terms you was on with him. And then, supposing the worst were to happen with my master? How could you account for it without raising suspicion? No, it must be gone through with; but I daresay as we, being the only witnesses, can direct it pretty well as we want. You can certify to the crowner for apoplexy as confident as you like, and so avoid a *post mortem*."

"I hope to God I may," breathed out Mandrake fervently.

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There was no sign of anything unwonted about the house as they stopped before it. Behind those silent, streaming walls the deaf-mutes were keeping the secret of the dead and of the sore smitten alike. Not one agitated breath of the tragedy had fluttered abroad as yet. The two men held the situation so far in their own hands.

Before the dead the living! Poor Remedialist! poor Festus! Not all his superhuman possession had been able to save him from this at the last. That abnormal foresight had failed to foresee its own termination. He lay perfectly white and still on the bed to which they had carried him, breathing little difficult, automatic breaths. There was no stain of blood to foul his pillow. The padded weapon and the padded head had seen to that between them. Very gently Roger freed the poor bruised skull of its sleek, submissive mask, and revealed the queer red bulb underneath. It was like pealing its sheath from a tulip-bud. The fiery Celtic blood, so long "subdued to what it worked in," flared out under his hand. But no laugh of roguery proclaimed its emancipation. That brisk and resourceful nature was to exist henceforth in the shadow of its own undoing. There is no mortal knowledge which can assure one safe footing on the heights where the gods walk.

His friend did all for him that love and tenderness could devise. It was just a case, pathologically, of brain concussion. Yet, perhaps, through all, he dreaded death less for the patient than that ruinous awakening he foresaw. Having made the insensible man as easy as he could, he bent his footsteps for the dead.

There was no question here of any compromise with life. They had borne the body, by his directions

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into a neighbouring room, and laid it upon a sofa. The light of an electric lamp beat full upon the awful face. It was blackened and distorted almost beyond recognition. The young doctor, for all his experience, shuddered as he stood regarding it.

What ghastly goal was this at last to a frenzied chase? All knowledge ends in death—but this knowledge and this death! He stood darkly pondering the processes of that insane avidity which had involved him, all unwitting, in its appetites. The thoughtless boyish challenge; the reckless test; the treachery which had ruined him—incredible at the time; the chance encounter, whose ultimate fruits had been his enlightenment as they had been his redemption—all the panorama of his recent days passed between him and this dead face. He could look at it, for that, unflinching; he could say with unfearful heart that, from first to last, he had never designed this father of his love one hurt or wrong. What the old man had wrought, he had wrought upon himself.

The wind beat madly upon the casement, and, entering through some crevice, softly rocked the swinging lamp. In the swaying of the light the horrible features seemed to work and move. What secret were they struggling to express? It lay deep within, strangled from utterance. For evermore, he swore to God. The grave should receive and hold it. Had he choked or been choked? There was a mortal distinction in the tense. But, for all the purposes of evidence, this aspect was enough. *Why did he do it? Why did he do it?* He could breathe the cry now with all the tragic poignancy of a soul to whom the avid lusts for knowledge were incomprehensible. For the rest, the question was answered.

And now, at last, Pauline must know. He could

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wound her heart no longer with a cruel reticence. She must be comforted, with what assurances of a distempered mind ravening to its own false conclusions he could afford her. There was some consolation to himself in the thought. He had borne this distracting burden so long alone. He must go to her—he must return to her at once, and woo her with his love to a first conception of the awful revelations he had to make. Bending a last look on the dead face, he covered it softly and went softly out of the room.

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CHAPTER LI

IT was all over—the nine days' wonder, the little term of wild gossip and surmise, the verdict of the twelve good men and true—it was all over and done with. Afflicted society had come to reconcile itself to a Remedialistless Wigmore Street, and to re-swear its allegiance and its nerves and livers to the plain orthodoxy of the pharmacopœia. The body of Professor Urchin, unsearched and unmutilated, had crackled into fiery dust in the crematorium at Woking, and a small buried urn of bronze contained all that survived to represent the material part of that never very human personality.

As to the inquest, its evidence and verdict may be dismissed in a few words. The two chief witnesses were, of course, Roger and Johnson. According to their testimony (condensed), the deceased had conceived such a violent hatred of the unfortunate Remedialist and his pretensions as had brought about a complete overthrow of his own reason. Such obsessions were on record. The greatly gifted were not uncommonly the objects of insane and morbid jealousies. Envy, being of all passions the most demoralising, was quite associable in its last state with a condition of homicidal mania. For the rest, there was evidence to show how the deceased had manœuvred to gain his way into the house, but none as to his complicity with a certain drunken vagabond,

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all hope of cross-examining whom had been cut short by his death from delirium tremens in a hospital to which he had been traced. The coroner, in the result, proved obliging, the jury reasonable and sympathetic. It was understood that the young doctor's dual connexion with the deceased and his victim placed him in a very painful position. Their concern, they intimated, was with nothing but the cause of death, and they attributed that to "an apoplectic seizure, during and by reason of an acute attack of homicidal mania."

So settled the dust of that brief and sinister *cause célèbre*, and the sensitive and nearly related to it were allowed to shut themselves away and court forgetfulness.

It found them soon enough and consolingly enough. In this flood-time of the world's traffic, the wheel-marks of any particular vehicle, though it be the King's state-coach, will not go long unobliterated. Professionally and socially Roger soon settled into his gait — no feverish pursuit of fortune like the other, but the sober paces of a decent, prosperous practitioner.

And the knowledge which lay behind?

* * * * *

Pauline had a little broken down when released from the terrible strain of those recent events. It was no collapse with her, but a natural enough prostration after a supreme effort of self-control. She could not, indeed, deplore, from one point of view, the merciful end of things; but, that being secure, her thoughts would revert, with tears, to the days before the great unhappiness, when she had appeared to be the one object of the old man's devotion and his best inspiration to good.

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Roger was very pitiful and helpful with her, persuading her gradually to the conviction that she might revere her father's memory, and believe in his utter sincerity up to the date of that fatal day when a devil had entered into his spirit by the eyes, and thereafter possessed him.

"I will explain it all to you, dearest, when you can bear to hear it," he had said; but for some time the thought remained too painful a one to her to endure. But suddenly, one bright revivifying morning, when the tragedy had been laid some four or five weeks, and the balance of the dead days behind was beginning to weigh less and less, she came to him in his study, and, with a little sigh and smile, put her arms about his neck.

"Will you tell it me now, Roger—all, every word?" she said. "That I should have been content to leave my dear love on remand, as it were, and for such a faithless time! Roger—tell me—why did he do it?"

He smiled gravely, took her hand, and led her to his desk in the window.

"Sit there, Paulie, he said, "while I get out the evidence and lay it before you. You must be prepared for something very strange and a little frightening. Do you still wish me to?"

"Yes, Roger."

He unlocked a drawer in one of the pedestals, and brought out a tied parcel, which, being unfastened, revealed two books and a couple of folded papers.

"This book," said he, referring to the larger of the two, "and this scrap of ancient vellum I turned up at St. Peter's Square while going through your father's effects there on your behalf. I had expected to find them, and I found them. This second little thing in

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green shagreen—it is a diary, dear, a very odd little series of priestly memoranda—was, I confess, a surprise to me. Neither I nor, I am convinced, Festus guessed of its existence. It is interesting, as supplying a link in the chain of evidence. Finally, this tracing was made by my poor friend himself from a print in the British Museum, and I have borrowed it of him to complete the tale of proof. Upon the four turns the whole story of this miserable business."

He took up the heavier volume—an old octavo in worn brown calf—and began to turn over the leaves.

"Do you recollect, Paulie," he said, "the name of the book which your father accused me of stealing with a deliberate intent?"

She answered at once: "Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers.'"

"There it is," he said, putting the book down before her, marked at a particular chapter—"a really wonderful coincidence that I should have selected it; but so it was. He secured it afterwards to his own possession. Now I cannot open the case better than by giving you that chapter to study. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, therefore, Paulie, because within it lies the clue to all the rest."

She seated herself, and, with a little fluttering sigh, bent over the book, and read as follows:—

"Among the almost countless quacks and empirics who flourished in London during the latter half of the seventeenth century, there was none more notorious than Sharezer the Jew. A vicious age is a sceptical age, and a sceptical age is a superstitious age, whereby, through all the history of mankind, charlatanism will be found to have prospered most when most, one would think, in the way to be discounted. But the

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fact is that men cannot do without a faith of some sort, and will justify their deeds before Baal rather than lack a god altogether.

"This Sharezer enjoyed an immense reputation in his day as a fortune-teller and chirurgeon, or bone-setter. He was reputed the possessor of a magic talisman or amulet, which enabled him not only to read exactly into the minds of those who came to consult him, but, by penetrating to the secret sources of their complaints, to suggest remedies which were generally as successful as they were extraordinary. Certainly, he would appear to have effected some marvellous cures, if the traditions respecting these are to be accepted as authentic. He could make, it was said, the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the barren poll to bear issue in a luxuriant crop of hair—a gift so notable that last that, in an age of lovelocks, it is not surprising to learn that Sharezer amassed a fortune out of it. The king himself (Charles II.) is believed to have visited him, and more than once; but of that there is no certain testimony.

"A pity that so admirable a reputation should be associated with the vices as well as the virtues of its qualities. But so it always is. The abnormally gifted are not uncommonly 'caught into the snare of their own feet.' The diviner must be something more than human not to turn his power to his material profit. Sharezer was popularly credited with a share in more than one more than dubious transaction of his scandalous time. The Duke of Buckingham was, for one thing, his consistent patron; and that, perhaps, speaks a volume in itself.

"This arch-seer, or arch-imposter—which you will—perished with his wife in the Great Fire of London. The two, driven from their house in Tower Street

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by the approaching flames, had, unknown to the bystanders, returned to it (with the intent, probably, to secure some cherished possession), at the very moment that the train was fired which was to blow both it and them to perdition. The building, unfortunately for the two, had been one of those singled out for destruction, with a view to stopping the progress of the conflagration. *Sic itur ad astra.*[1]

"There survived, for long after the disappearance of this notability, a legend concerning the business of his exit which is perhaps worth repeating. He had married, it was said (being the first of his stock who had condescended to a Gentile), the daughter of Sir Richard Callander, knight-hosier of Great Tower Street, whose shop 'At the sign of the Golden Fleece' (it exists to this day, its front a fine example of Tudor carving and panel-work), stood but two doors west of the wizard's own abode. But the lady, it was reported, being secretly a member of the proscribed religion and under the dominion of a Catholic priest, had revealed to her confessor the source of her husband's power in the stone or amulet, and had been bidden by the horrified ecclesiastic at once to steal and destroy that execrable charm. Which behest she, compromising between her love and her duty—and perhaps her superstition, for all women are superstitious—had obeyed in so far that she had filched the thing from her spouse while he slept, but only to hide, not burn it—which final iconoclasm, however, the great fire was to undertake for her. Upon which, we can imagine,

[1] "From later records it would appear that the house itself was not destroyed, but only partly disembowelled by the explosion and afterwards restored, since a print of it, with the houses adjacent, and a note of its famous tenant occurs in Bassett's 'Old London Illustrated,' *tempo* George III."

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if we like, the dismay of the chirurgeon on finding his means to fortune taken from him, and his art exposed and betrayed by the one who should most have respected its secrets. It was then, says the story, that in a last desperate effort to discover the whereabouts of his lost talisman, Sharezer had rushed back, followed by his clamorous lady, into his doomed abode, and had there met with the fate of an unbeliever. But more probably, being a Jew, his final concern had been for his money-bags."

Pauline, coming to the end, looked up pitifully and earnestly into her husband's face.

"Well, darling?" he whispered.

"I don't understand, Roger," she said—"I don't quite understand. Had Mr. le Touzel found this magic thing?"

"Yes, he had, Paulie. He had anticipated your father in its discovery, and that was why your father hated him to such madness."

"And what was it?"

"Ah, Paulie! that is the strange, strange part. Read this now."

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CHAPTER LII

HE put into her hands the little crinkled sheet of vellum or parchment; and she read, with a shrinking heart, what is here set down :—

"That which many and notable have sought and only one found, which is the Alkahest or Philosopher's Stone; and that is this. Being the Stone of the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge which Eve in the Garden of Paradise spat from her rosy lips. And IT lay ungerminant in the desert which was Eden, until he who was called Abidah, that is the world's master-thief, being the impenitent one that thereafter died upon a cross, came upon it where it shone like a fallen unquenched star under the sand. And he put out his hand to IT—as erst the first mother to the fruit whose stone IT was—and gathered IT to be a counsellor unto himself in the deep understanding of evil, and an heirloom to his descendants, of whom IT is and shall be while his seed prevail."

Such, it appeared, was the translated text, penned in a faded delicate hand, of some Hebraic characters, very ancient in suggestion, which the manuscript contained on its other side. There were two notes writ under the above rendering, the first of

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which, in the same hand as the translation, ran as follows:—

"Hidden in mezzanine of their house front, as confessed to me by the woman May, wife of Sharezer descendant of Abidah. Look under latch of casement, which, unscrewing, shall reveal an aperture, and therein the stone. God direct me."

The second note was modern, and in the unmistakable caligraphy of the Professor himself. It embodied a suggestion, or purpose, which, being carried into effect, was responsible for all the subsequent evil:—

"Very curious. A genuine old Semitic phylactery, circa *fifth or sixth century, and probably coeval with the Talmud. Once enwrapping, no doubt, some charm or amulet reputed of great value to its possessor, and transmitting the record of its origin and virtues from parent to son. Its translator, the Priest, evidently well versed in the Mishna and the later commentaries thereon. See his diary for confirmation; and, for account of Sharezer, Antrobus's 'Notable Swindlers of all Ages,' if my memory serves me."*

Pauline, very pale, and with an action as if she were putting away something forbidden, laid the docket on the desk.

"Was it really *that?*" she whispered faintly—"the Stone of the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge?"

"I have no choice but to believe it," he answered in a low voice.

"Roger!"

"Shall I go on, Paulie?"

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"O, yes, yes! I must hear it all now."

"Very well," he said. "Then we will follow with a certain entry in this little green book. Though, as I told you, dear, this same diary is only a quite recent revelation to me, a passage in it will so help to explain the sequence of events, that I may as well quote it now, instead of tracing out conclusions, as Festus did, without its assistance at all. Here it is."

He thereupon read out to her the following excerpt, prefacing it with the statement that it was a translation in the Professor's handwriting, from the original, which was in Church Latin, and dated 1666:—

"To-day came again that woman May or Maia, true convert though wedded to Sharezer the Jew saltinbanco, who owes his vile arts, as she confessed to me, to that talisman which she was to steal from him sleeping and so destroy it for the salvation of her soul. Yet, after all, she brought but the incantation or phylactery which had contained the accursed thing, having through faint-heartedness concealed the bauble itself where none may find it. And she made known to me the place; and so for the present it rests, while I examine what the parchment avers, being curious of its characters, which appear ancient."

"This Father Welby, probably, had to fly precipitately after the fire had raised a mortal hue and cry upon all of his cloth; or, possibly, he himself perished in the conflagration."

He ended, and, putting down the book, "The final note," said he, "is again your father's. And now, my dearest, you have all the evidence before you. And can you piece it together?"

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She shook her head.

"I would rather you told me the story in your own words, Roger. I am very stupid."

"Very well," he answered; "and in as few as possible. This is it, so far as my wits have been able to conceive it:—

"There existed, until very recently, a certain block of houses in Great Tower Street in the City, whose erection dated from some time during the early seventeenth century. In the middle house of this block, as you faced it, there was living, about 1666, Sir Richard Callander, Knight-hosier. Two doors to his left was established a notable empiric, by name Sharezer, who had married, probably against her father's wish, the Knight's own daughter May; a door or two to his right lodged one John Welby, a priest, according to his own private diary, of the Society of Jesus, and of course, in those days, a proscribed individual. Nevertheless, it would appear, he had succeeded in converting to his faith the wife of the Jew physician hard by, and in inducing her to confess to him the secret of her husband's unhallowed power, which centred in the possession of a mysterious age-inherited stone. Thereupon he charged her, on her soul's salvation, to filch away that detestable thing, that he might destroy it and free her from the bonds.

"She consented; but faint-willed, or fond-hearted, at the last moment brought him only the parchment, or phylactery, which was used to wrap up the charm, and told him that she had hidden the thing itself away where none might look to find it—in a secret deposit, that is to say, under the latch of the casement in the mezzanine of her husband's house. So the priest noted down her statement; but in

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that he was either mistaken or misled. I will show you how in a moment. In the meanwhile, it would seem, he put away the parchment, pending its more curious investigation by himself, in a secret hole in the wall of his own lodgings, where he was accustomed to conceal his diary, and no doubt other self-incriminating evidences. But scarcely had things reached this pass when, contemporaneously with the Magician's discovery of his loss, the great fire broke out in the neighbourhood. It is impossible to say at this date, of course, what frenzy of remorse, or of obstinacy, or of persuasion induced Sharezer's wife to pursue her frantic spouse into their threatened abode, which, it is to be supposed, he had entered in a last attempt to discover the whereabouts of his lost treasure. It is on record only that she did so, and that the two were unwittingly destroyed in the explosion which ensued, and which would appear to have wrecked the interior of the building. And so their part in the story ends.

"We come now to our own day.

"That block and those houses, Paulie, were still standing until within a year or so ago, when the whole was pulled down to make room for what are called modern improvements. Sir Richard Callander's house possessed a beautiful carved front, which was bought by the United Service Stores, and set up, in one piece, in the Company's great show-room. About the same time, I suppose, occurred the discovery of the secret hole in the wall of the priest's lodgings, and of the papers, subsequently acquired by your father, which it contained.

"The Diary, by these means, must have come into his hands, and, in all probability, the scrap of parchment was enclosed within it. Between them,

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and after consulting the Antrobus book, he must have gathered the possibility of alighting on a discovery of an extraordinary nature. But, unfortunately for him, two errors of which he was guilty came to stultify all his hopes. The first lay in his taking the priestly diarist too literally at his word.

"Do you know what a *mezzanine* is, Paulie?"

"No, Roger."

"Well, it means a low storey in a building introduced between two higher ones. Sir Richard's house possessed such a thing, but the Wizard's did not. When the priest noted that the stone was hidden behind the latch of the mezzanine window in Sharezer's house, he stated what was impossible. He had either misunderstood or forgotten. It was hidden in that place in Sir Richard's house, and Festus, comparing the statement with the print mentioned in the Antrobus chapter, was quick to jump to the right conclusion. He found a quiet opportunity of examining the old front erected at the Stores, and, in short, anticipated your father in the disinterment of its long-hidden secret.

"Your father's second error, or misfortune, turned upon his fatal habit of absent-mindedness. He had been examining the phylactery at his office, one must conclude, on that morning so pregnant with results to us both, when, disturbed or interrupted in some way, he had hastily and abstractedly folded the thing up, and slipped it into the lining of his hat, probably with the intention of making a more intimate study of it at home.

"At that pass in I came, and being left by myself in the room for a little, was supposed by him on his return to have collared the thing from the table on which he was now convinced he had left it lying. His

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transaction with the hat had been completely forgotten by him in the interval. My strange choice of the Antrobus book of course confirmed his suspicion—he saw himself suddenly robbed of the means, as no doubt he had already conceived it, to the great opportunity of his life, and he jumped to an association of my choice with some pre-conceived or, at least, suddenly conceived plan to appropriate his discovery to myself. All that has happened since dates from that fatal moment of pre-occupation.

"I come now, Paulie, to Festus's strange acquirement of the clue so strangely lost by your father, and to the quick, shrewd use he made of it. I want to reassure you only that, until you urged me to ask that explanation of my friend, I had known no more than you what was the nature of his discovery, or by what first astonishing chance he had alighted on the track of it."

Roger then related, in short detail, the history of the purchase of the hat by Festus ("O, Roger!" interpolated Pauline, with a soft catch in her voice; "and it was I—I who exchanged it in my ignorance at the door for a pot of Polygonatum multiflorum!"), and of that resourceful journalist's exploiting of the slender clue which it revealed. But, inasmuch as all that ground has been traversed by the reader, its re-pacing here becomes a matter of supererogation.

"Your father," he ended with, "never rectified his original mistake as to the right hiding-place of the stone (you recollect that incident of the casements, which, as I now understand it, he discovered somewhere and purchased as the ones actually removed from Sharezer's house) until the phylactery was returned to him. And then, realising the truth at

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last, he found it to be a case of shutting the stable door after the steed was stolen. Festus, to be sure, would not have parted with his open sesame otherwise. I do not blame, or defend, my unhappy friend, Paulie; but he did good—he did good with his gift, however the justice of his title to it might be open to question."

She sat like one stunned.

"Yes, he did good," she repeated mechanically. "It meant life to him, but death to papa."

"'*For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die,*'" said the young man with considerable emotion. "I once, Paulie dear—I once knew the touch of it on my own lips. It remains a sombre memory with me—of sudden, infinite knowledge, of an approaching horror of retribution—which I shall carry to the grave. An awful vision, an awful ecstasy, Paulie; and Festus dared it day by day, and many times a day, for the sake of the good it might bring to poor suffering humanity. O, Paulie! I think it was well that your father was beaten in the race."

"Yes," she whispered, bowing her head, with her hands clasped as if in beseeching. "And I pray—pray that it may be his atoning part at last to hold fast that terrible secret from ever springing into the light again."

A footstep comes down the stairs, and a mild, stringless voice speaks at the door.

"Are you in there, Roger, my son?"

Mandrake goes to the door, and opens it, with a pitying smile.

"Here I am, Festus. What is it?"

Such a strange, white face, with its bright, wandering

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eyes and eternal groping expression—a face whose wanness takes an unearthly hue by contrast with the fiery thatch above.

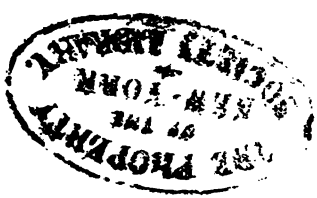
"I have lost something," he says.

"What is it, Festus?"

The little man shrugs his shoulders, with a weak laugh.

"Faith, I don't know, my boy, unless it's my own mind. I only know it's lost. I wish you'd help me look for whatever it is."

But he is destined, poor soul, never to find it on this side of the grave.



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